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# Exporting After Trade Missions: A Qualitative Analysis of Small and Medium Enterprises

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Tongila Manly

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2016

Abstract

Exporting After Trade Missions:

A Qualitative Analysis of Small and Medium Enterprises

by

Tongila Michelle Culbreath-Manly

MBA, Atlanta University, 1987

BA, University of Colorado, Boulder, 1981

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

January 2016

## Abstract

Some U.S. small and medium enterprises (SMEs) participate in trade missions but return with no results. Accordingly, some researchers question the effectiveness of these export promotion programs. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the experiences of SME representatives who had attended a trade mission to South Africa. The research question explored the strategies that SME leaders required to successfully export their goods and services after a trade mission using the conceptual framework of resource-based theory. Snowball sampling was used to recruit and gather interview data from 22 SMEs. Thematic analysis of interview data and document sources, inductively and deductively coded, identified themes of strategic planning processes, country briefings, reasons for being in the country, resources, barriers, positive outcomes, and export commitments. Associated with these themes, 5 stages of the trade mission process and a model of the dynamic relationships in a trade mission emerged, which include recommendations of how to effect change in the process. The results from this study are expected to inform new interventions for export promotion programs for SME exporters. This study promotes social change by preparing SMEs to export, thus building more sustainable U.S. businesses. Applying these findings can support the development of SMEs to export and become long-term exporters benefiting the businesses, employees, and their communities through improved wages and increased tax revenues.

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## Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to my grandparents, Omer William Rogers and Carmen Earsel Rogers, and to my parents, George Emmanuel Harper and Harriett Ann Rogers Harper – all entrepreneurs who inspired my passion for business development. A special dedication to my beautiful Venus; she left us too soon. However, you don't remember a rose for how long it lived, you remember it's beauty. We remember Venus' beautiful smile that she bestowed to you as a blessing.

## Acknowledgments

A person walking a journey of a thousand miles never walks alone. The truth for my experience was there were many people who walked along with me. These include my doctoral committee, chaired by Dr. Godwin Igein, along with Dr. Matthew Gonzalez, and Dr. Brenda Jack; with Dr. Freda Turner, who instilled confidence motivating me to continue onwards; and the many other cheerleaders, fans, and booster club members. I wish to acknowledge all who played a part in the successful completion of this study. Additionally, I recognize the 23 anonymous people who gave of themselves and their time to produce this study.

My warmest gratitude is to my husband, Ted, and my children, Venus (dearly departed) and Victor. They were extremely patient during the time that I prepared this study. They are my motivation and inspiration.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Growth-oriented small and medium-sized businesses look to exporting among other strategies to identify new customers or new alliances. Consequently, firms engage in a process where they look for international markets and allow business activities in other countries gain a greater share of their interest (Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2014). The internationalization of businesses is an important economic development goal of federal, state, and local governments because exports benefit economies through increased tax revenues (Cumming, Fischer, & Peridis, 2014). Additionally, with export-fueled growth, firms create new jobs. With that motivator, some government organizations provide public programs to support companies with their export business strategies, and these programs indirectly encourage job creation (Katz & Istrate, 2011). Export promotion, therefore, is a tool to assist business growth to foreign markets and to accomplish governmental business development objectives.

Export promotion directly and indirectly reduces the business risk of exporting by providing businesses access to market research, export markets, tools, and activities such as educational programs (Shamsuddoha, Ali, & Ndubisi, 2009). Some export promotion programs include foreign trade offices, trade missions, and trade shows, others include financial assistance for exporters (Cassey, 2014; Leonidou, Palihawadana, & Theodosiou, 2011). Using various combinations of these services, economic development organizations assist businesses to manage challenging export-related deficiencies by providing targeted solutions.

Several authors have noted that participants of trade missions benefit from the experiential knowledge acquired from a trade mission event (Durmuşoğlu, Apfelthaler, Nayir, Alvarez, & Mughan, 2012; Shamsuddoha et al., 2009), however these were quantitative studies. The literature on export promotion has few recent entries and those address topics quantitatively. Considering Cassey (2014) conducted research on U.S. state overseas offices and found that those programs benefit firms by reducing their transaction costs. Cassey concluded with questions of how states decide the destinations for foreign facilitation recognizing the results could help organizations determine the most impactful locations for export promotion, such as future trade missions. Further, Wilkinson, Brouthers, Salazar, and McNally (2009) recommended a study to identify the effect of location on export performance. Further, Leonidou et al. (2011) suggested further research on export promotion and performance should involve a qualitative study. However, at the time of this study, there was a lack of qualitative research on small business exporters.

Furthermore, Cavusgil and Knight (2015) reflecting on their groundbreaking research in 2004 on early internationalization of small firms suggested future research to round out the understanding of early internationalization and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that move slowly to internationalize or not at all. I specifically designed this study to address these authors' with my focus on U.S. trade missions to South Africa. In this study, I explored the business participants' perspectives to generate recommendations to make trade mission events productive and profitable, ensuring the best use of the business participants and public's investments.

### **Background of the Problem**

Trade missions are promotional events in foreign markets where domestic companies meet face-to-face with potential trade partners in these markets. These well-planned, highly publicized events allow businesses to gain experiential knowledge while promoting their products and services (McLeay & Andersen, 2010). Governments initiate trade missions for opportunities to showcase their businesses and allow for exportation of their products or services. For example, the U.S. Department of Commerce (DOC) and other national government agencies organize trade missions to support their economies' growth (National Economic Council, 2012). National development organizations encourage U.S. states, chambers of commerce, and industry associations to organize trade missions to ensure businesses have ample opportunities to visit countries where they might find favorable market conditions. When chosen appropriately, a promotion organization introduces a company to an environment where there is a good strategic fit (Lavie, Haunschild, & Khanna, 2012). In that regard, the EDO can indirectly influence the development of export sales using trade missions.

Often, on a U.S. state's trade missions, either the state governor or another high-ranking elected official such as the lieutenant governor leads the delegation. The governor-led trade mission is a form of an official visit (McMillian, 2012), which is distinct from a State visit composed of a foreign visit by a head of state, such as a president, chancellor, or a prime minister. A State visit is the highest level of diplomatic contact between two governments (Head & Ries, 2010); by contrast, a governor-led trade mission does not rise to the level of a head of state visit. This study does not include



head of state visits, and instead focuses on other types of trade missions, including those that are governor-led. A governor or another state official who attends trade missions generally has at least two areas of focus: to promote the businesses and services of the state, and to promote the state's political interests (McMillan, 2012).

Public programs such as trade missions provide market access, particularly for SMEs that require assistance in overcoming barriers in foreign markets (Martincus, Carballo, & Garcia, 2012). A trade mission is a targeted development approach focused on a country or a region; the focus might also include selected sectors. The focus of this study was trade missions to South Africa, an emerging market economy (EME). South Africa is the newest member and smallest country of the BRICS trade bloc composed of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Emerging markets have high future growth prospects (Kearney, 2012), and for this reason, business leaders and managers of government departments will benefit from a better understanding of how to assure the benefits from trade mission events to emerging markets.

### **Problem Statement**

Government export promotion programs, including trade missions, have been demonstrated to enhance the export performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2012). SMEs represented 81% of the participants of U.S. Department of Commerce-led events from 2008 to 2011 and participated in trade missions that secured \$1.25 billion in sales (National Economic Council, 2012). Nevertheless, some studies' findings question the effectiveness of export promotion programs (Cassey, 2012), and that trade missions have negligible, negative, or

insignificant effects (Head & Ries, 2010). For example, Wilkinson et al. (2009) found most trade mission participants made no sales and did not recoup their costs. The general business problem is trade mission participation is not always profitable and/or does not result in contracts for future exports. The specific business problem is that some U.S. SME leaders lack strategies for successful exportation of their goods and services after a trade mission experience.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the strategies that SME leaders require to successfully export their goods and services after a trade mission. The study population consisted of U.S. SME representatives who attended a trade mission to an EME. I collected data from 22 business representatives that I interviewed about their experiences attending a trade mission.

The results of this study are intended to positively affect practices for preparing SME exporters, executing trade missions, and addressing follow-up issues. Additionally, the findings and recommendations are presented to promote the creation of customized export programs for SMEs. Consequently, participants' ability to export after a trade mission to an emerging market will improve as the participants are better prepared to represent their firm in the foreign market. The social impact of this study will be more SME's becoming exporters benefiting their communities through increased tax provisions and jobs.

### **Nature of the Study**

Qualitative researchers use research designs that facilitate the exploration of social issues within a natural setting (Rennie, 2012). The explicit involvement of the researcher through self-disclosure acknowledges either the authority or honesty of the researcher (Rennie, 2012; Sandelowski, 2010). Further, using exemplars to replicate the participants' voices, the qualitative researcher is able to describe the experience in a manner in which it is generalizable (Rennie, 2012). In comparison to a quantitative research methodology, in which a researcher uses measurements of numerical data to predict results or assess differences, qualitative researchers analyze text data to find meaning (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012a; Rennie, 2012). However, a quantitative study might follow qualitative research for theory elaboration or testing (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013). Another option is to use mixed methods incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods; some researchers suggest the mixed methods approach produces a more developed study (Molina-Azorin, 2012). When research questions are complex and benefit from more analysis than with either qualitative or quantitative methods used separately, researchers use mixed methods.

The researcher uses qualitative methods to address questions that relate to how the phenomenon occurs and why it occurs. Consequently, the selection of the qualitative research design becomes a critical decision because of the array of design choices for addressing different types of research questions. In comparing designs, Kenny (2012) suggested phenomenology as the best design when the researcher's deep internal feelings lead to a question from which exploration in the external social world can take place.

Phenomenology provides a universal description of the phenomenon through the lived experience of the participants (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012b). The difference with ethnography is the researcher describes the behavior patterns revealed through the culture of a group while having extensive exposure to the phenomenon (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013). These qualitative designs are different from a case study that researchers employ to describe a bounded system such as an event, a program, a place, or another phenomenon (Yin, 2013). With several approaches to choose from the qualitative researcher can address many different problems.

Each of these qualitative designs has strengths, particularly relating to the human perspective through the participant's involvement in the study. Neither method was appropriate for the goal of this study, which was to conduct an exploratory study of several SME leaders after their participation in different trade mission events. A qualitative descriptive approach was the best choice because it enabled me to capture each participant's voice for understanding the issue and for designing interventions to improve trade mission outcomes. The qualitative descriptive approach is less interpretative than phenomenology; however, it is more interpretive than a quantitative description design (Sandelowski, 2010). The researcher in a qualitative descriptive study uses semistructured interviews and other qualitative techniques, providing a more flexible approach to addressing the specific problem and purpose statements.

### **Research Question**

The principal research question that guided this study was: What strategies do SME leaders require to successfully export their goods and services after a trade mission?

I explored this research question through semistructured interviews using a set of interview prompts. I developed and designed these interview questions from the literature review, also to reflect the conceptual lens of the resource-based theory.

### **Interview Prompts**

1. Describe your planning process when you prepared for your trade mission to South Africa.
2. What prior knowledge did you have about trade missions before planning your visit to South Africa?
3. Explain your thoughts about South African business culture prior to the trade mission.
4. Describe the type of reception you received when your delegation visited South Africa?
5. What role did the trade mission leader play in your firm's performance during and after the trade mission?
6. What barriers did you experience when you attempted to engage with South African companies?
7. What company strengths impacted your performance during and after the trade mission to South Africa?
8. What company weaknesses impacted your performance during and after the trade mission to South Africa?
9. Describe your perceptions of South Africa that changed after participating in the trade mission?

10. Based on your perspective after the trade mission, how did it impact your follow-up activities?

11. What would it mean to your company to have an alliance with a South African company?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The resource-based theory (RBT) formed the conceptual framework for this study. Proponents of resource-based theory confirmed that firms use tangible and intangible idiosyncratic resources to create a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, Ketchen, & Wright, 2011). Penrose laid the foundation for the resource-based view in 1959 (Lockett & Wild, 2014). Later, in 1984, Wernerfelt coined the term *resource-based view* (RBV; Barney et al., 2011). Wernerfelt (1984) provided the definition of a resource as a business strength or as a weakness; these determine the profits of the firm. Further, Barney (1991) identified four characteristics of resources for gaining sustainable competitive advantage: (a) value, (b) rarity, (c) inability to imitate, and (d) not having a substitute (VRIN). Unique combinations of characteristics identify the firm in a competitive environment.

Several researchers have broadened the RBV, leading to an evolution of the theory (Barney et al., 2011). For example, Lavie (2006) extended the RBT to include resources that the firm does not own or control. Beyond this understanding, a resource is an asset that reflects the idiosyncrasies of the firm that, used strategically, can create a sustainable competitive advantage for the firm (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). My use of the RBT in this study was to explain how the participant, as a member of the trade

mission delegation, uses internal and external resources such as brand names, innovations, management talent, and other unique firm resources for a competitive advantage.

### **Definition of Terms**

*BRICS*. An alliance of emerging economies including Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (Shaw, 2012).

*Economic development organization (EDO)*. These state, provincial, local, and country funded agencies develop and implement economic activities including international trade and investment activities to sustain and grow the economy (Park & Feiock, 2012).

*Emerging markets*. Also called *emerging economies* or *emerging market economies (EMEs)*, refers to these developing countries' ongoing development of financial policies, reforms and other market-friendly development activities (Kearney, 2012). The focus of this study, South Africa, is considered an emerging market according to this definition

*Export promotion organization*. State-sponsored agencies that provide services for potential and existing exporters (Freixanet, 2012). Also referred to as a *national trade program*, other purposes include international promotion to encourage foreign direct investment (Katz & Istrate, 2011)

*Export promotion programs (EPPs)*. Public policy initiatives designed to assist companies to overcome barriers in accessing foreign markets (Freixanet, 2012).

*Export performance.* The resource-based view of export performance is that it arises from firm factors such as size, age, and experience representing tangible and intangible resources (Kahiya & Dean, 2014). Performance goals include both objective and subjective measures (Kahiya & Dean, 2014).

*Trade mission.* An economic development activity initiated by governments and other agencies to promote exports or to recruit foreign direct investment (McMillan, 2012). The term is interchangeable with *overseas missions* or *investment missions*.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions explain researchers' beliefs, what they know, and how they conducted the study (Scotland, 2012). Researchers make assumptions to guide their studies. In this study, the research participants were all business representatives that participated in a trade mission. A study assumption was that the participants all answered honestly regarding their activities and organizational results. Another assumption was that the participants understood that they did not attend a tourism event or trade show, and specifically involved in a trade mission. Trade missions and trade shows have different objectives; unlike trade missions, trade show events might produce immediate sales results (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2012). I deliberately excluded standalone trade show participants, although some of the included participants had attended a trade mission that had an industry trade show component.



**Limitations**

Limitations are issues that might create bias or affect the study's validity (Collins & Cooper, 2014). Researchers acknowledge these issues are beyond their control such as the participant's loss of memory or a small sample. However, as small samples are a feature of qualitative research, the concerns in qualitative research are with the appropriateness and adequacy of the information to answer the research question (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Trotter, 2012). With that understanding, I conducted interviews with American business representatives who had participated in trade missions. These interviews conducted many years after the event might have found some participants with limited memories. However, the lapse of time from 1 to 20 years also allowed some of the participants to gain perspective on the trade mission event and the place, South Africa, and their retrospectives provided for thoughtful discussions. Whether the participant remembered the events well enough to provide meaningful input was a relevant concern, especially if their memory affected the credibility of their stories. Noting these concerns, I carefully constructed meaning from the participants' descriptions after they reviewed the transcripts.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations define the scope of the research study to provide boundaries around the topic, the participants, and other elements that explain the study (Silverman, 2010). The delimitations of this study were U.S. trade missions to South Africa from between 1993 to 2013, a period spanning from the resumption of bilateral relations between the countries to the research cut-off period. The domain of this study was trade missions to

emerging markets, specifically South Africa. The results from this study might not apply to other emerging markets in the BRICS alliance due to regional and cultural differences. The study included participants who engaged in a trade mission before the end of 2013. The sample comprised companies' representatives who participated in trade missions that originated from the United States.

### **Significance of the Study**

As a form of public investment, export promotion programs (EPPs) are some of the implementation tools for economic development (Katz & Istrate, 2011). Although there is controversy over export promotion and the effectiveness of some programs (Cassey, 2012), the question is whether it is a sound public investment (Head & Ries, 2010). The scrutiny trade missions receive is due to the high profile, particularly when governors and other elected officials attend (McMillan, 2012). However, for the use of public funds, it is a worthy investment when participants return with contracts and prospects for future exports.

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the strategies that SME leaders require to successfully export their goods and services after a trade mission. Through interviews of U.S. small and medium business representatives who attended a trade mission, I gathered the participants' experiences. Through the interpretive process, I described their experience in developing international business alliances and exporting. Considering that interpretive studies in international business were rare (Lamb et al., 2011), there were few qualitative research studies that covered this phenomenon. Therefore, with this qualitative study, I expanded on the existing knowledge of trade

missions and offered recommendations for increasing the success of SME exporters that can significantly impact on new job creation.

### **Contribution to Business Practice**

This qualitative study presenting the participants' experiences provided a new perspective on trade mission performance compared to the abundant quantitative studies. Consequently, SME leaders that review this study will understand the challenges some trade mission participants experience and their strategic approach in creating successful outcomes. Additionally, development officials and other policy makers might consider different support tools for trade mission participants, particularly newly internationalizing SMEs. Within the recommendations, I suggested different approaches to assisting SME leaders before and following the trade mission event. These solutions focused on business development and decreasing trade barriers with emerging market partners, such as building awareness of host government regulations, business environment knowledge, and cultural awareness. The business participant's perspective on trade missions are intended to provide government officials new insights on the challenges the SME encounters when exporting, thus leading to targeted forms of assistance.

### **Implications for Social Change**

I designed this study to assist in SME internationalization through programs directed towards new international business development by providing a description and interpretation of the trade mission activities that produce positive and negative results. The findings and recommendations of this study have implications for SME exporter development: a better understanding of the SME representatives' experience will aid in

preparing future trade missions that meet the needs of all the stakeholders and possibly produce results that are more profitable. The benefits for businesses are growth and sustainability. These create secondary benefits to communities of increasing jobs and revenues through an increasing tax base.

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the strategies that SME leaders require to successfully export their goods and services after a trade mission. The principle research question guiding this study was: What strategies do SME leaders require to export successfully after a trade mission? The intent was to identify firm resources, capabilities, and external environmental factors the trade mission participants perceived as influencing their performance outcomes. Using the resource-based theory as the conceptual framework, I examined studies using other frameworks such as the contingency approach, institutional, resource-advantage, strategy, trade, and economic theories.

The focus of this study was small and medium firm internationalization through trade missions to emerging markets. Accordingly, the SME and entrepreneurship literature primarily included studies from the international perspective. Because the international business domain concerns the firm that conducts business in multiple national environments (Devinney, Pedersen, & Tihanyi, 2013), this literature review examines a broad range of subjects including literature on culture, international entrepreneurship, international trade, management, marketing, strategic management, organizational behavior, and economics. The sources originate from (a) articles in

scholarly, peer-reviewed journals; (b) business books; (c) and governmental agency and nongovernment organization web pages. Included are 96 references; 85% are from peer-reviewed sources.

In this review, I summarized these sources, providing contrasts and noting their conceptual contribution. Publication of the majority of the literature (87%) was within 5 years of 2015, the year this study was completed. The studies that were more than 5 years included seminal works providing significant background, which without them the foundation of the study would be incomplete.

The search strategy included keyword searches around themes and combinations of these themes. The primary keywords were (a) economic development, (b) export promotion, (c) export performance, (d) SMEs: firm and knowledge characteristics, (e) culture, (f) market characteristics, and (g) international alliances. Additionally, I added RBV or RBT to keyword searches to identify studies from the resource-based view or theory. The databases for these searches included ABI/Inform, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, Emerald Management Journals, Sage Premier, and ProQuest Central. Google Scholar was an additional database that linked to Walden University Library to provide access to some articles.

The organization of this literature review starts first with the RBT framework to define the terminology occurring throughout the literature review. Within the literature review, I included the characteristics of SMEs and the resources for exporting. Following those descriptions, I included market selection and the economic characteristics of South Africa. Barriers to SME internationalization include distances,

both geographical and cultural, that affect the development of strategic alliances. Export performance included the methods of measuring exports. Finally, I reviewed the contribution of qualitative research to the international business domain.

### **Resource-Based View Theory (RBT)**

The RBT is a framework for explaining and predicting the basis of a firm's competitive advantage and performance (Barney et al., 2011). The focus of the RBT is on the resources of the firm. These include tangible physical assets and intangible routines, processes and behavioral assets and capabilities. They are firm-specific, unique resources that enhance the competitiveness of the firm (Wernerfelt, 1984). Resources and capabilities are internal and thus controllable firm attributes that enhance the firm's performance (Kaleka, 2012).

Kaleka (2012) offered insights into resources and capabilities commonly noted for successful export performance. These business resources and capabilities included experiential, scale or size, financial resources; and informational, customer relationship, and product development capabilities (Kaleka, 2012). Strategic resources developed to enhance firm performance can provide a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). They include internationalization knowledge, dynamic capabilities, entrepreneurship, information technologies, management capabilities, and supply chain integration (Barney, 2012; Fletcher, Harris, & Richey, 2013; Gil-Pechuan, Exposito-Langa, & Tomas-Miquel, 2013; Pergelova & Angulo-Ruiz, 2014). In this study, I explored these resources and capabilities as they relate to firms that participate in trade missions and how they influence export performance.

Barney (1991) identified the four characteristics of resources for gaining sustainable competitive advantage being (a) valuable, (b) rare, (c) not easily imitated, and (d) not easily substituted (VRIN). According to Barney, a resource is valuable if used in the strategic context of strengths and weaknesses to enable a firm to benefit from opportunities better than the competition and overcome competitive threats. Rare resources are difficult to obtain and sometimes unique such as management talent; imperfect imitability refers to the relative cost for competing firms to reproduce or replicate a resource or find a substitute (Barney, 1991). Altogether, the resource must have these components of VRI, and a firm must exploit these resources through processes that are unique to the organization, such as through special marketing assets, for example organizational brand (Kozlenkova, Samaha, & Palmatier, 2014). Without functional systems, routines, and capabilities a firm does not have the ability to actualize the potential of the resources to generate a sustainable competitive advantage.

In later expansions of RBT, VRIN became the VRIO referring to the organizational processes that are idiosyncratic for the firm (Kozlenkova et al., 2014). Thus, firms using unique organizational systems and routines exploit the VRI to provide a competitive difference (Kozlenkova et al., 2014). For example, firms use intangible marketing-related resources including organizational brand, market knowledge, or customer relationships to significantly improve their sustainable competitive advantage and, ultimately, their performance outcomes. Kozlenkova, Samaha, and Palmatier (2014) explained the application of RBT to marketing studies by identifying three marketing domains that used the theory: marketing strategy, international marketing, and marketing

innovation. Marketing researchers use the RBT to evaluate multiple, different resources including tangible and intangible marketing assets, and explain the relationship between the marketing investments to the firm's performance over time (Kozlenkova et al., 2014). Accordingly, marketing researchers explain the value of marketing resources and capabilities as integral to the organizational processes that create the sustainable competitive advantage

Further, managers employ various resources to adjust competitively in unpredictable environments. The dynamic capabilities framework explains sustainable competitive advantage in terms of strategic resources. This framework, which is an expansion of RBT, focuses on organizational routines and a firm's ability to manage in rapidly changing environments (Kaleka, 2012; Tan & Sousa, 2015). To address inconsistencies between competing conceptualizations, Peteraf, Di Stefano, and Verona (2013) offered a contingency-based approach to reconciling the two divergent streams of research that explain dynamic capabilities. Researchers choose to use one or both of these frameworks. Peteraf et al. (2013) showed that these two competing views of dynamic capabilities could provide a firm a sustainable competitive advantage based on specific factors and under certain contingent circumstances.

Therefore, firms use dynamic capabilities to reconfigure and reshape their ability to compete in pursuit of successful export performance (Kaleka, 2012; Tan & Sousa, 2015). For example, in markets of high risk and uncertainty, firms employ learning capabilities. Managers use these capabilities to develop new behaviors to overcome foreignness and other barriers (Cumming et al., 2014; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Wales,



Parida, & Patel, 2013). In foreign markets, exporting firms have limited, imperfect information and manage in uncertain environments. Therefore, managers use dynamic capabilities and marketing capabilities to understand the environment, plan strategy goals, and for strategy implementation (Morgan, Katsikeas, & Vorhies, 2012). The remaining literature in this review provides a synthesis of these themes and the identified phenomena.

### **Economic Development in the United States**

Foreign direct investment (FDI) and exports are significant mechanisms for economic growth in the United States. When a foreign firm makes an investment, it creates job gains when the firm hires (Jackson, 2013). Conversely, some FDI produces job losses through mergers and acquisitions (Jackson, 2013). Despite the potential job losses associated, U.S. states and cities, as well as most countries, compete for FDI for the capital inflows and additional new jobs. McMillan (2012) described FDI as an important motivator for elected officials to take overseas trade missions. During these events, governors and other elected office holders promote their locality as destinations for FDI (McMillan, 2012). For business participants of trade missions, however, the focus is to secure contracts to export (National Economic Council, 2012). These contrasting views of economic development highlight the tension between developers of where they should place their focus and the best use of public funds.

Exporting and investment have unambiguous purposes in economic development; they exist at different stages of business internationalization (Freixanet, 2012). SMEs rely on exporting for market entry (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015); in contrast, MNEs focus

on FDI. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), small firms create most U.S. jobs and the majority of U.S. exporters are also small firms (SBA, 2014).

Hence, exporting for small businesses supports economic development goals by encouraging firms to increase jobs, develop new innovative products and services, and for growth through internationalization. Consequently, Freixanet (2012) noted the development of SMEs and MNEs require different types of program support.

U.S. small businesses are in important focus of study because of their significance to the U.S. economy. In 2012, SMEs accounted for 56.1% of all jobs (SBA, 2014). Although almost 98% of exporters were small businesses, they for accounted for only 33% of total U.S. exports (SBA, 2014). Since 2008, the period following the global recession, economic rejuvenation was critical in the United States due to the conditions that proceeded and persisted during the recovery (Griffith & Czinkota, 2012). However, in 2010, less than 1% of U.S. businesses exported (DOC, 2010; Katz & Istrate, 2011; Wood, Logar, & Riley, 2015). Possibly indicating a lack of knowledge of the benefits exporting offers to small firms, or a lack of interest in exporting.

This low export rate led to proposals for increased exports as the remedy for SME's sustainability and growth, factors in the establishment of the NEI. This U.S. government policy proposed the doubling of exports by the end of 2015 (Griffith & Czinkota, 2012). In response to the challenge, the Minority Business Development Agency of the DOC, led trade missions to South Africa, China, and Australia in 2011 (National Economic Council, 2012). The purpose of the South African trade mission was to expose minority-owned businesses to foreign markets to encourage trade and create

jobs through exports (National Economic Council, 2012). Although internationalization was not new to small firms, it was a challenging prospect to channel traditional SMEs to international markets.

**SME internationalization.** Internationalization of small and medium businesses was a topic of increasing interest in the literature. Even though Gilmore, McAuley, Gallagher, Massiera, and Gamble (2013) found there was no uniform international definition of an SME, they urged for a consistent definition for the sake of comparisons. In their review of 94 articles, they reported the size of the SME ranged from 10 up to 500 employees (Gilmore, McAuley, Gallagher, Massiera, & Gamble, 2013). The micro- or the very small business is a subset within the SME category that can employ from 1 to 10 people (Gilmore et al., 2013). The SBA's measures used to identify the size of the firm included the number of employees and annual sales (SBA, 2014). SMEs are important to most economies as attested by the increasing numbers of studies from developed as well as emerging economies.

The definition of an SME and distinction between an entrepreneur determined the domain of literature to follow. For example, in some studies, the authors defined the SME term (Arend, 2013; Cumming & Fischer, 2012; Olejnick & Swododa, 2012; Martincus et al., 2012). Some authors did not differentiate between the terms SME and entrepreneur (Ganotakis & Love, 2012), using them interchangeably, or not defining either (Gil-Pechuan et al., 2013). Additionally, the general category of SMEs is the focus of this study; the distinction is to create the boundaries of this literature review.

Furthermore, policy makers determine the targets of support programs. In that, Cumming and Fischer (2012) reported the trend towards project funding based on entrepreneurial activities rather than organization size; suggesting that a definition of the SME and entrepreneurial activity requires specificity. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) definition of entrepreneurial activity given by Cumming and Fischer (2012) listed the expansion of economic activity as one feature. The definition given by Peiris, Akoorie, and Sinha (2012) included a cognitive element, referring to the businessperson's mindset and behavior. For example, during the initial approach to internationalization and subsequent to market entry, an entrepreneur would consider opportunities rather than risks, using internal and external resources to identify and develop business opportunities (Davidsson, 2015; Peiris et al., 2012; Tolstoy, 2012). Cumming and Fischer (2012) noted that entrepreneurial activity differentiates the SME that is growth focused. Olejnick and Swododa (2012) stated a growth orientation suggested having an international growth focus.

Gilmore et al. (2013) explained that entrepreneurs start many SMEs; however, some owner/managers that start SMEs might not behave entrepreneurially, proactively seek new growth opportunities (Davidsson, 2015). In a similar manner, the entrepreneurial founding team, as defined by Ganotakis and Love (2012), are the individuals involved from inception in making the strategic decisions, such as having an international focus, and being the owners of the firm. Simply stated, the SME is a category of businesses based on their size referring to the number of employees or annual turnover (Gilmore et al., 2013). This definition does not account for the characteristics of

the owner. This literature review addresses the structural and knowledge characteristics of the SME that stimulate entrepreneurial outcomes.

Some SMEs pursue internationalization later in their operational history. Olejnik and Swoboda (2012) referred to the traditional SME to differentiate between three patterns of internationalization related to the age of the business, the scale and scope of internationalization, and the time lag to international sales activities. The age of the firm when it internationalizes, no matter the size, also suggests the speed of internationalization (Peiris, Akoorie, & Sinha, 2012). Within these varied definitions, the age of the venture, whether it begins internationalizing early, upon inception (up to 6 years), and the degree of internationalization are topics of many international entrepreneurship studies (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015; Navarro-García, Schmidt, & Rey-Moreno, 2015; Olejnik & Swoboda, 2012; Peiris et al., 2012). Researchers of SMEs tend to include all small firms regardless of the age upon internationalization.

However, the distinction between international entrepreneurship and SME internationalization (Hilmerston, 2014a) studies included the time dimension, the percentage of foreign sales, and entrepreneurial behavior where the owner/manager seeks opportunities in changing environments (Casillas & Acedo, 2013; Peiris et al., 2012; Tolstoy, 2012). The link between these two domains reflect their history; business internationalization was the foundational topic that lead to international entrepreneurship research in the early 1990s (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015; Peiris et al., 2012; Tolstoy, 2012). Peiris et al. (2012) presented a definition of the international entrepreneurship domain, the operational mode of the entrepreneur in the international environment, and the

antecedents of sustainable competitive advantage for the international entrepreneur. A similar stream of research included the export entrepreneurship concept focused on speed, degree, and scope of international activities (Navarro-García et al., 2015). The focus of export entrepreneurship included the external environment with contingency factors being the distance between the countries or competitiveness of the industry.

These differences between international entrepreneurship literature and SME internationalization narrowed the scope of this literature review. Considering the focus of this study concerned SMEs, some entrepreneurship studies provided the context of the internationalization environment and were useful for this literature review. Tolstoy (2012) reported that SMEs, having limited resources, engage within unstable business environments to find new markets, and in that manner, they are entrepreneurial. Hence, the internationalizing SME exhibit entrepreneurial behaviors in seeking opportunities outside of their domestic area.

However, the low export participation rate of U.S. SMEs requires further examination. Katz and Istrate (2011) noted American SMEs had difficulties internationalizing due to negative perceptions. These perceived, and in some cases, real external barriers, and internal organizational factors make the internationalization of SMEs difficult (Brouthers, Nakos, & Dimitratos, 2015; Wood et al., 2015). Internal obstructions included limited resources, skills, and capabilities (Anderson & Ullah, 2014; Hilmersson, 2014a). External challenges included market characteristics such as cultural practices, trade barriers, lack of social networks, weak institutions, and infrastructure incompatibilities (Hilmersson, 2014a; Karakaya & Yannopoulos, 2012). The U.S.

federal government provided support through trade agreements, legislation, and financial programs (Griffith & Czinkota, 2012; Jones & Williams, 2012; Wood et al., 2015).

Additionally, state governments provided export promotion through EDOs to assist SMEs internationalization.

**Economic development organizations.** The roles of EDOs included establishing policy, and providing programs and incentives that encourage economic growth within a region (Park & Feiock, 2012). The broad term EDO used in this study comprised the variety of organizations that carry out these business support activities. Park and Feiock (2012) reported EDOs exist to perform several roles at all levels of government including counties and cities. Although county agencies focused more on service provision rather than economic development, also they were less innovative than cities.

In an international context, EDOs assisted their users to work through challenges with foreign institutions and other international business problems (National Economic Council, 2012). Institutions comprise the formal rules through which countries operate and these include regulatory structures, governmental agencies, legal systems, and including culture (Coyne & Williamson, 2012). Whereas strong institutions promote international trade, poorly performing, weak institutions present significant impediments to trade and FDI (Bardy, Drew, & Kennedy, 2012; Coyne & Williamson, 2012; Holtbrügge & Baron, 2013). Weak institutions create risks for investments and impact decisions on which markets to enter, including when and how to enter (Holtbrügge & Baron, 2013). Thus, Oldenski (2012) suggested that firms determine their FDI or export decisions based on the institutional quality of the target market, suggesting that

manufactured goods with complex activities are best exported, especially to markets with weak institutions. Holtbrügge and Baron (2013) reviewed the top four BRIC countries noting that they all have weak institutions as a common characteristic. With these many considerations, the SME should understand the structure of institutions of the target country as they affect their ability to navigate successfully in the business environment.

### **Export Promotion Programs (EPPs)**

Federal government agencies, such as the DOC, and state EDOs sponsor and conduct export promotion activities to assist companies in accessing international markets. Export promotion organizations are government-sponsored agencies that provide services for potential and existing exporters (Freixanet, 2012). Most states offer EPPs to their businesses (Cassey, 2012). However, the literature was scant on individual states' export promotion efforts. The literature on U.S. states' economic development and export assistance included articles on Indiana and China's exchange program (Fu & Lyles, 2013) and California's overseas office closures (Cassey, 2012). Noting the closure of California's trade program, Katz and Istrate (2011) argued that state governments should move aggressively to develop their export programs to assist companies in accessing foreign markets. Additionally, Cassey (2014) emphasized the benefits of EPPs with findings that some state programs focus on selected destinations based on the location of an overseas office. With established overseas offices, export promotion organizations can encourage the appeal for an export destination by conducting their trade missions to those countries. Therefore, export promotion organizations provide



useful services to exporters, particularly when offering EPPs as a resource for export facilitation.

An objective use of an EPP is to encourage exports by addressing firms' needs, particularly based on where they are in the stage of exporting (Freixanet, 2012). Leonidou et al. (2011) identified four categories of EPPs: (a) informational such as providing industry or marketing information (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2012); (b) educational programs would include counseling and training (Cumming et al., 2014; Leonidou et al., 2011); (c) trade mobility programs were trade missions, trade shows, and overseas offices (Leonidou et al., 2011; McMillan, 2012); and (d) financial aid and government-supported lending programs (Miocevic, 2013; Pergelova & Angulo-Ruiz, 2014). Some of the programs with the highest impact included trade missions, trade shows, and informational programs (Freixanet, 2012; Martincus et al., 2012). Freixanet, (2012) found that export programs are effective for firms at all stages of internationalization, but the highest impact occurs for businesses in the early stages of considering exporting and as their export commitment increases.

Durmuşoğlu et al. (2012) addressed EPPs that reduced informational barriers through the provision of appropriate market information. Durmuşoğlu et al. (2012) defined export promotion instruments and services (EPS) in the same manner as EPPs in that firms use them as external resources. In that manner, Miocevic (2013) noted EPPs are external resources for the internationalizing firm as identified in the RBT literature. Therefore, exporters use EPP services for their enabling effect in a foreign market. In that regard, Freixanet (2012) confirmed that EPPs indirectly improve manager's skills

and help them to develop sales leads. Particularly, by attending trade missions and trade shows, companies enter new markets with the information and market contacts provided by the EPP (Freixanet, 2012). In this way, SMEs internationalize using EPPs to facilitate their export-related skills and through access to foreign markets.

To illustrate this, for example, Martincus, Carballo, and Garcia (2012) showed export promotion programs targeted to SMEs produced the greatest effect. Small firms used these programs, mostly using trade missions and trade shows, to expand their total exports. Additionally Miocevic (2013) looked at the usage of financial support EPPs. In their findings, the large and medium firms were given the largest share of funds, yet the smaller firms were more productive with their funds. The recommendations from the distributive justice lens were to allocate more financial resources to small firms because they lacked the internal organizational resources but made the most use of the funds received (Miocevic, 2013). These two studies of EPPs were from smaller countries, thus illustrating that a common concern of small and large countries is the creation of EPPs to target the developmental needs of SMEs.

Most SMEs require support to export successfully; however, authors focused on manufacturers and there were few that addressed services firms or retailers. Lu, Quester, Medlin, and Scholz, (2012) conducted a qualitative case study to understand how Australian professional service firms successfully export. Lu et al. (2012) confirmed that service exporters benefited from government export support and service firms use EPPs early in the internationalization process for research support and to identify the appropriate markets to pursue. Consequent to identifying appropriate markets, service

firms use government resources to attend trade shows. The literature included a concentration of studies on manufacturers; however, studies that consider other types of firms could provide a better understanding of the special experiences of the variety of SMEs moving towards internationalization.

**Trade missions.** Firms of all types use EPPs. Particularly, SME leaders' participate in trade missions to take advantage of the public's investment in business development (Cassey, 2014); and for individual firms, to create a competitive advantage by meeting potential customers face-to-face (Leonidou et al., 2011). However, Head and Ries (2010) argued trade missions had no sustainable trade results, as many of the announced business deals never actualized into sales. Though there are controversies in the literature, many researchers confirmed the services provided through trade missions benefited SMEs.

**United States trade missions.** The role of trade missions in export promotion received scant attention in the literature from 2011 to 2015. The lack of studies was especially true of U.S. trade missions compared to those conducted for developing nations (Martincus et al., 2012). McMillan (2012) in studying U.S. governors' role in the context of international relations and foreign policy noted many states conducted trade missions for the promotion of FDI. These visits had multiple goals that included promotion of the state for investment and export. Therefore, McMillan stated, the term trade mission was used interchangeably with overseas missions and governor-led missions to include the multiple activities that take place.

In fact, some states conduct international relations activities through trade missions independent of the federal government and have established foreign trade offices to support these visits (Cassey, 2012, 2014; McMillan, 2012). Cassey (2014) and McMillan (2012) found a positive relationship between the state having an office and a governor-led trade mission to the country with the international office. McMillan noted overseas trade offices played a vital role in supporting overseas governor-led missions. Moreover, governor-led missions provided prestige to the delegation of participants and ensured high-level dignitaries would attend the associated events (McMillan, 2012). Therefore, to answer Head and Ries's (2010) question of what the high-level official brings to the trade mission, McMillan noted the presence of a high-level official is an important factor for trade mission performance.

There were two variables making trade sales possible during governor-led trade missions. First, the governor provided credibility to the businesses joining the trade mission, and second, the state provided access to the market through an international trade office (McMillan, 2012). Head and Ries (2010) noted the expectations are for a participant to have concluded a deal after officials lead a trade mission. Such that the participants would successfully transact an export sale or some other form of trade transaction such as a consulting contract or a letter of intent during the event. There is scant knowledge in the literature of the strategies that SME participants employ to be productive during trade missions to conclude a sale.

Even though export promotion organizations provide resources through EPPs to increase business competitiveness internationally, EPPs do not affect performance

directly (Freixanet, 2012; Leonidou et al., 2011). However, as firms utilize EPPs, they can use them as an external resource (Leonidou et al., 2011; Miocevic, 2013). For example, an SME can develop an effective marketing strategy with supportive EPPs (Leonidou et al., 2011; Morgan et al., 2012). More importantly, with enhanced managerial skills and increased market knowledge, the SME is equipped with new resources and capabilities to enter the foreign environment competitively. Then strategy implementation helps in the achievement of a competitive advantage (Morgan et al., 2012), thus boosting market performance and eventually firm export performance.

### **Firms' Structural Characteristics**

The structural characteristics of the business define the demographics and describe the organizational idiosyncrasies. Age is a characteristic that distinguishes some traditional SMEs from early and later internationalizing firms (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015; Olejnik & Swoboda, 2012; Peiris et al., 2012). Ganotakis and Love (2012) confirmed a positive relationship between age of the business, referring to the committed exporter, and export performance. Additionally, Olejnick and Swododa (2012) showed that older SMEs develop the resources to extend their scope of internationalization. However, the phenomenon of young (<6 years) firms exporting successfully indicates a positive effect of globalization on international trade.

In the exporting literature, there were many studies on young firms, but much of the literature addressing the structural characteristics of trade mission participants and the exporting firm included size as an obvious feature of SMEs. Small firms are uniquely constrained, compared to large firms and MNEs, due to size and resource limitations

(Anderson & Ullah, 2014). Consequently, when SMEs pursue an export-oriented process, their size affects their outward movement (Martincus et al., 2012). Some SME owners remain small as a choice, choosing to benefit from their independence, flexibility, ability to make quick decisions, and close relationships with their customers (Anderson & Ullah, 2014; Love & Roper, 2015). Martincus et al. (2012) found firm size and lack of capacity were impediments for small exporting firms that use government-provided export programs. The challenges were difficulties in accessing market information, the capacity to benefit from the information, the ability to absorb market entry costs such as country-specific product labeling and designs, and including the financial commitment of establishing an export department (Martincus et al., 2012). However, Martincus et al. found EPPs promoted export growth by facilitating the SME's ability to manage these challenges.

In contrast, Bortoluzzi, Chiarvesio, Di Maria, and Tabacco (2014) argued that size was not a distinguishing feature of firms exporting to emerging markets. From the RBT perspective, resources and capabilities were more critical than company size (Bortoluzzi, Chiarvesio, Di Maria, & Tabacco, 2014). Bortoluzzi et al. (2014) found, rather than size, instead prior international experience, and firm reputation were critical to export performance. Lu et al (2012) concurred with these findings; nonetheless, size impacted small services firms' competitiveness, as they were especially susceptible to resource deficits. However, for some SMEs their location of was a factor that affected access to key resources such as EDOs, export-related services, human resources, banking, and physical assets (Freeman et al., 2012). Generally, SMEs have resource deficiencies

related to their size. Consequently, SMEs seek out resources to build their competitiveness and overcome their weaknesses

The intangible resources of entrepreneurial and international orientation provide early internationalizing exporters their motivation to overcome the lack of other resources. Navarro-García, Schmidt, and Rey-Moreno (2015) found firms' experiential and structural resources affected organizational learning that propelled the firm towards to an international orientation. International orientation is an intangible firm characteristic that reflects management's global outlook and positive perceptions of exporting opportunities (Olejnik & Swoboda, 2012; Wood et al., 2015). Olejnik and Swoboda (2012) found that SMEs with a high international orientation were more likely to internationalize early (<3 years). However, some traditional SMEs export slowly over time and some never export. Yet, with the many resources the U.S. government offers, in addition to reducing barriers, export participation rates remains low.

With these considerations, Wood, Logar, and Riley (2015) examined the exporting attitudes of U.S. managers that had not exported to understand the incentives that would motivate them to export. The results were that managers were more likely to consider exporting when their international interest was stimulated. Therefore, based on the findings from Olejnik and Swoboda (2012) and Wood et al. (2015), management's international outlook and managerial motivation creates a positive attitude towards exporting. Unmistakably, managerial attitude has an essential role in the success of the export venture.

For example, when exporting commences managerial export commitment is demonstrated by the establishment of an export structure; identified by an allocation of managerial, financial, and human resources (Navarro-García et al., 2015). Many researchers that addressed SMEs structural resource requirements for competitive advantage included financial resources as a critical element. Love and Roper (2015) included the need for funding for innovative product development, and Griffith and Czinkota (2012) concluded that financial resources, including government support, remain critical for exporting success. For example, Pergelova and Angulo-Ruiz (2014) studied new firms that used special U.S. federal government programs, finding that government financial programs positively influenced the SME's competitive advantage. Access to capital is a critical element of an organizational exporting structure.

Along with tangible resources such as capital, intangible resources included international experience and the ability to learn from experience. Nemkova, Souchon, and Hughes (2012) found applying experiential knowledge from an international encounter to export planning could lead to successful export performances. Additionally, Nemkova et al. (2012) found planning and improvisation capabilities were complementary in the decision-making process. Whereas improvisational decisions can lead to competitive advantages arising from the resulting unpredictable firm behavior (Nemkova, Souchon, & Hughes, 2012). Hence, management can deploy various intangible assets that complementarily strengthen other resources creating a sustainable competitive advantage.



Particularly, Love and Roper (2015) found in studies of European SMEs, the combination of innovation and exporting capabilities supported sales growth. Innovative competencies include the firm's technology infrastructure, management technology skills, research and development, product design and development (Love & Roper, 2015; Voola, Casimir, Carlson, & Anushree Agnihotri, 2012). Further, Voola, Casimir, Carlson, and Anushree Agnihotri (2012) studied the complementarity of marketing orientation and technological opportunism capabilities to understand their combined relationship to performance. Furthermore, He, Brouthers, and Filatotchev (2013) found firms that consider the interaction of multiple factors, such as institutional characteristics, transaction costs, and marketing orientation capabilities created a higher export performance.

Market-oriented capabilities are internal structural resources that the firm uses to understand the market, customer requirements, and to gain competitive advantage (He, Brouthers, & Filatotchev, 2013). Cadogan, Sundqvist, Puumalainen, and Salminen (2012) extended the understanding of marketing orientation in the international context describing export market-oriented behaviors that the firm displays through three sources of strategic flexibilities: export experience, decision-making flexibility, and coordination flexibility. The exporting firm requires both export market-orientation and strategic flexibilities to increase the export success (Cadogan, Sundqvist, Puumalainen, & Salminen, 2012). Through various combinations, the exporting firm employs a range of complementary internal characteristics, creating a unique structure utilized to manage the

dynamics of the foreign environment and hence create a sustainable competitive advantage.

### **Firms' Knowledge Resources**

The strategic use of knowledge-based resources is essential for firms to gain a competitive advantage, according to the RBT (Fletcher et al., 2013; Kaleka, 2012; Theodosiou & Katsikea, 2013). In that regard, government export programs provide knowledge resources such as market experience, competitive information, planning support, and other services to indirectly affect the firm's export performance outcomes (Cumming & Fischer, 2012; Freixanet, 2012). Karakaya and Yannopoulos (2012) confirmed export programs such as trade missions and trade shows were an opportunity to develop experiential exposure. Managers used the exposure to create new knowledge, and overcome some of their export barriers. Consequently, the exposure to knowledge-generating opportunities enhances their existing knowledge resources (Hilmersson, 2014b). When the firm uses these valuable knowledge resources uniquely and strategically, they become a source of sustainable competitive advantage due to being difficult to imitate.

The lack of market knowledge is a barrier some SME leaders experience when they are new to the internationalization process. Market knowledge, specifically institutional knowledge of the host country, is critical when entering a market that is distant geographically and culturally (Hilmersson, 2014b). Johanson and Vahlne (2009) confirmed the relevance of the liability of foreignness (Denk, Kaufmann, & Roesch, 2012), to the concept of psychic distance. Psychic distance is the perceptual difference of

another's cultures, values, and language that affect the individual's ability to form relationships and understand new markets (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Prashantham & Floyd, 2012). Moreover, not having knowledge of the business environment leads to a condition of outsidership (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). These liabilities can be overcome by becoming an insider or have a connection to a business network or multiple networks (Hilmerston, 2014b; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).

**Network resources.** When moving into a foreign market, the firm, as a member of the network, benefit from the resources of business and social relationships. Through network relationships, the firm can access knowledge flows and thus identify business opportunities (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Additionally, the business network relationships become the key to exploiting these opportunities (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Therefore, having a short psychic distance and possessing market knowledge, SMEs can establish and develop business and social relationships in foreign markets. In a case study, McLeay and Andersen (2010) confirmed the criticality of strong networks for organizing art focused trade missions and for creating successful trade mission outcomes. The participants used the network, such as the State's overseas trade office, to identify potential buyers preceding the trade mission. Therefore, the creation of networks mitigates problems for market entry and reduces the liability of foreignness.

Social networks develop over time through interpersonal trust and based on social relationships. In contrast to business networks whose members have a high degree of institutional knowledge (He et al., 2013; Hilmerston, 2014b). Through these social relationships, firms create pathways to insidership (Hilmerston, 2014b). Further, small

firms leverage their social capital to benefit their internationalization process (Neville, Orser, Riding, & Jung, 2014). Therefore, social capital is a resource firms employ to facilitate learning processes and growth (Prashantham & Floyd, 2012).

However, beyond accessing networks, firms require capabilities to manage the learning process and benefit from social capital. Firms utilize the four processes of absorptive capability: the ability to (a) acquire, (b) assimilate, (c) transform, and (d) exploit new knowledge for financial performance (Wales et al., 2013). Wales, Parida, and Patel (2013) expanded on extant research on absorptive capacity to explain how firms moderate the increasing costs of absorptive capacity over time with a strong entrepreneurial orientation. As organizational routines, absorptive capacity accentuates learning processes especially when employed in dynamic environments such as when firms are attaining and assimilating new knowledge (Wales et al., 2013). Hence, absorptive capacity is a dynamic capability process the firm employs for learning. Accordingly, through the network firms connect to a synergistic process where they are learning and contributing to the knowledge the network holds.

Knowledge of the institutional environment is another resource the firm accesses through the network. Specifically, the host country environment includes institutions, regulations, and established structures (He et al., 2013). For an SME entering a new market this is important knowledge content because it can reduce barriers. In that regard, Neville, Orser, Riding, and Jung (2014) found the host country network to be a valuable resource for recent immigrants and was found to speed their access into foreign markets. For example, using the knowledge-based view, Neville et al. (2014) confirmed that

immigrant SMEs that export outperform indigenous firms by having valuable and rare knowledge resources. The social, institutional, and other knowledge resources these SMEs have through their international networks provide their sustainable competitive advantage.

**Internationalization knowledge (IK).** Developing social capital in the network takes time and requires relationship-building capabilities (Prashantham & Floyd, 2012). Therefore, Fletcher and Harris (2012) posited that networks were not important sources of IK for new firms. However, Fletcher and Harris found that internationalization knowledge was a part of the knowledge content required for small firms when starting the internationalization process. Fletcher and Harris addressed the small firm's use of technological, market, and IK. Beyond identifying the content and sources of knowledge, additionally, Fletcher et al. (2013) supported the definition of IK as the firm's ways of learning in the process of internationalizing. Fletcher et al. (2013) conceptualized knowledge as an internal resource from the perspective of the RBV because knowledge is firm-specific. Consequently, IK is valuable and can create a sustainable competitive advantage (Fletcher et al., 2013). Firms use internal organizational processes and their unique method of learning to convert the new knowledge for the process of internationalizing.

Because organizations access and process knowledge uniquely, knowledge is a strategic resource and a source of competitive advantage. Therefore, looking to understand the knowledge acquisition process, Fletcher and Harris (2012) addressed the research question of how small firms acquire new knowledge. Using a matrix framework

with internal and external sources of knowledge, Fletcher and Harris found that small firms used a combination of sources for their IK. Based on the framework, the trade mission participant would benefit from the indirect experience of the overseas EDO using the consulting officers' vicarious experiences. They found that IK has multiple uses: for accessing the market and further growth in the market. However, a newly internationalizing SME would begin the knowledge acquisition process through access to the EDO and various export programs.

Further, extending the same data from Fletcher and Harris (2012), in a multiple case study of 10 exporting firms, Fletcher et al. (2013) asked why firms needed different types of IK, where firms source IK, and when firms use IK. Fletcher et al. described three categories of IK: market entry, localization, and international enterprise, and found the firm requires knowledge from each of these categories as they grow internationally. Furthermore, applying the framework of sources of new knowledge to the specific challenges of their research participants, Fletcher et al. stated these results had direct application to managers using EPPs by revealing how the participant managers benefitted from advisory services in their internationalization process. Cumming et al., (2014) had similar findings that business advisory services enhance the development of internationalization capabilities through knowledge development. Hence, EDOs should create strategies for developing SMEs' knowledge acquisition early in the development process.

For these reasons, Åkerman (2014) stressed the critical role of market knowledge and acquisition strategies. Following Fletcher and Harris' (2012) use of three sources of

knowledge, Åkerman considered how the firm acquired knowledge other than through experience and concluded that knowledge acquisition is multidimensional. Unlike the conclusions of Hilmerston (2014b) on SMEs use of experiential knowledge by identifying four factors and four clusters to profile the users, Åkerman identified four knowledge acquisition strategies and developed profiles based on the learning style of the firm. Of the four strategies, Åkerman found that using diverse sources of knowledge, whether internal or external was the most useful. Therefore, Åkerman suggested, firms using a knowledge acquisition process would internationalize faster, expand to more markets, and would produce better competitive results. In addition, the process would be distinctive for each firm.

In comparison, Hilmerston (2014b) stated that experiential knowledge was fundamental to the internationalization process. Hilmerston identified four factors based on the source of the experiential knowledge arising from the social network, business network, institutional environment, or IK. For example, the firm on a trade mission can source market-specific, experiential knowledge through each of these sources. On the other hand, knowledge requirements change as the organization proceeds from start-up to being a committed exporter. In that regard, Ganotakis and Love (2012) found the entrepreneurial team requires a range of skills and knowledge sources, in addition to, a long-term commitment to having a successful export operation. Ganotakis and Love identified the importance of business and managerial experience as human capital, particularly in the initial phases of exporting. They found that as organizations proceed with exporting the experience levels increase. In that, managers develop greater

awareness by sensing business opportunities, developing awareness of industrial actions, and gaining a better understanding of the competitive environment. However, Ganotakis and Love found the knowledge and experience requirements change as the firm further commits to the internationalization process.

Consequently, as SMEs progress through internationalization stages, their knowledge requirements increase. For example, the SME develops from a single market entry to growing a global footprint. Accordingly, Johanson and Vahlne (2009) found market-specific knowledge is critical for each market entered. However, Fletcher et al. (2013) stated market knowledge is about the business environment, which anyone can access, comparative to market entry IK that is specific to the firm. The firm uses market entry IK when evaluating a new market by using internal skills such as relationship building, gathering knowledge of the local institutions, and developing networks then applying the knowledge to the operations of the firm. When firms are in the early process of internationalization, they have a critical need for market entry IK. For this reason, early assessments of the SME should identify the knowledge development needs.

In summary, knowledge acquisition researchers supported the criticality of market knowledge, institutional, social, or business knowledge for successful export performance. Åkerman (2014) presented the contribution that firms utilize diverse acquisition strategies of market knowledge from both internal and external sources. However, Hilmerston (2014b) valued experiential sources of knowledge. For the reason stated by Hilmerston and Jansson (2012), that market entry is challenging without experience. Consequently, understanding the type of knowledge necessary for market



entry and how to access market-specific knowledge through networks, consultants, and EDOs require acquisition strategies.

### **Market Characteristics: South Africa**

In the exporting literature, authors addressed topics on SMEs moving outward from the domestic to new international markets, particularly challenges in market entry. Authors addressed foreign business and cultural practices, trade barriers, lack of social networks, undefined or weak institutional settings, and marketing challenges.

Additionally, Hilmerston and Jansson (2012) included institutional distance referring to the differences between the home market and the host market, and the lack of knowledge that increases environmental uncertainties. Considering these challenges, SMEs require assistance to mitigate the uncertainty that occurs with cultural distance, different political, legal, and economic environments (PLE), and trade barriers (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2012; Freixanet, 2012). Therefore, market knowledge was critical for these circumstances: (a) the internationalization of SMEs, (b) strategy adoption, and (c) for export performance. For these reasons, market-specific information on institutions and the society benefits the SME when moving into complex environments (Åkerman, 2014; Hilmerston & Jansson, 2012; Parnell, Lester, Long, & Köseoglu, 2012). These challenges were critical for SMEs moving from advanced markets and entering emerging markets requiring resources to overcome market knowledge deficiencies.

For example, a lack of experiential knowledge results in the firm's inability to make predictions about the potential of the market and associated marketing challenges (Hilmerston & Jansson, 2012). In a study of 203 Swedish exporters, Hilmerston and

Jansson (2012) confirmed that the business network and societal knowledge of the local environment reduces uncertainty in markets that are distant institutionally and culturally from the firm's home market. Particularly, experiential knowledge in emerging markets results in greater certainty during the market entry process.

In that regard, in emerging markets, learning capabilities are relevant; they allow for the absorption of international experiential knowledge. Consequently, when managers move into new markets, having location based experience, their international experience can reduce the perceived environmental uncertainties (Hilmersson & Jansson, 2012). Clarke, Tamaschke, and Liesch (2013) argued that international experience is a multidimensional construct that encompasses the time dimension (Peiris et al., 2012), scope (Olejnick & Swododa, 2012), the diversity of the firm's experience, and the intensity of the exporting over time and the number of territories (similar to Ganotakis & Love, 2012).

Further, Chung, Wang, and Huang (2012) using a contingency approach, found when considering new international markets, the strategic marketing approach that managers use should focus on the size of the firm, manager's international experience, cultural distance of the countries, and environmental factors in the market. For example, the approaches to access a new international market for optimal export performance are contingent on environmental factors including consumer profiles and behavior, the legal environment, and cultural distance of the countries (Chung et al., 2012). Thus, Chung et al. (2012) stated firms with limited international experience should consider strategies that follow standardized marketing approaches that address the home and host markets in

a similar manner. This result assumes previous domestic experience, which would provide knowledge resources to draw on in a foreign market. In this regard, contingent on international experience, organizational age, or experienced management would provide valuable resources.

Comparatively, Bortoluzzi et al. (2014) used the resource-based perspective to evaluate the resources and capabilities firms required when entering emerging markets. The three critical resources for entering emerging markets were international experience, managerial capabilities, and marketing capabilities (Bortoluzzi et al., 2014). In particular, managers equipped with international experience had gained two kinds of knowledge: about foreign markets and the internationalization process (Bortoluzzi et al., 2014), which was defined to be internationalization knowledge (Fletcher & Harris, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2013). Hence, knowledge of the market is imperative for decision-making on market entry and for evaluating business prospects; international experience prepares the SME to make these decisions. In that regard, as Clarke et al. (2013) argued, international experience can result in advantages that are firm-specific and convert into capabilities.

**Political, legal, and economic environment.** The United States is looking to open up new foreign markets as exports to traditional trading partners are declining. Jones and Williams (2012) noted the focus on emerging markets such as the BRICS economies and sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, the exporter needs to understand the institutional environments of EMEs. Each country has cultural, political, legislative, and geographical attributes that are specific, thus the knowledge is market specific. For

example, Brouthers (2013) noted institutional environment uncertainties might negatively affect the firm's exporting, shipping, other transaction costs, and how the firm chooses to enter the market. With that recognition, Brouthers noted the importance of developing knowledge of the factors that make up the institutional environment. Further, Cadogan et al. (2012) found when firms entered dynamic and competitive markets with an export market orientation their performance success increased. Thus, with the opportunity to access new markets SMEs should use various resources to develop an understanding of the foreign environment and employ market orientation before making a strategic plan.

Firms use network resources and operational capabilities to understand the PLE and use that knowledge for strategic planning. Further, in the external environment, the *strategic fit* refers to matching the organization's resources within the environmental context (Cui et al., 2014; He et al., 2013; Nemkova et al., 2012). Organizations' fit into the environment when they conformed to the pressures from the external stakeholders, including local institutions and alliance partners (Lavie et. al., 2012). Consequently, the organization experienced internationalization success when there was an environmental fit (Cui et al., 2014), rather than failing to access the market due to ambiguity and uncertainty (Lavie et al., 2012). Thus, the network reduces knowledge gaps in experience and information, and reduces uncertainty in the environment.

Corruption, for example, creates an uncertain environment. Bardy, Drew, and Kennedy (2012) presented arguments on the manager's ethical perspective when investing in less-developed countries, particularly in Africa. Business ethics includes matters of corruption, human rights, regulation, and discretionary issues that might be

difficult for a manager to judge in a different cultural context. Albaum (2012) postulated that newly internationalizing managers would look for countries with similar ethical values. Albaum found that business ethicality, as an individual value, influences the behaviors of the individual. Therefore, understanding the market, and the ethical values of strategic partners can affect the quality of potential relationships. In addition, understanding cultural values could reduce uncertainty.

Using a database of U.S.-based firms, Arend (2013) questioned if the ethical trade-offs entrepreneurs make in changing, highly competitive environments increase their economic performance. The author considered how small and medium-sized businesses used dynamic capabilities. Because dynamic capabilities are routine processes and actions that the firm employs to reduce uncertainty, they are faster to implement, and they increase the firm's adaptability (Arend, 2013). Thus, Arend found that SMEs favored financial performance over ethical performance. However, the entrepreneurial firm that identifies opportunities in utilizing an ethical approach might follow that path. In that situation, the ethics-focused dynamic capability can provide the firm a competitive advantage particularly in an environment of complexity.

Emerging markets are complex and can be uncertain environments. Parnell, Lester, Long, and Köseoglu (2012) reported EME characteristics include (a) simple or complex external factors, (b) highly changeable conditions, and (c) lack good useful information. Therefore, Parnell et al. (2012) noted that SMEs might lack the resources to compete in these environments, and some might not understand the environment. For example, an uninformed SME that inadvertently applies the wrong strategy that result in

poor performance. Distinguishing between high performing and lower performing SMEs, Parnell et al. found the latter perceives lower levels of uncertainty. In other words, their understanding of the environment is not appropriate for the actual situation.

Entry to emerging markets such as BRIC countries, including South Africa, could require additional resources to navigate the foreign institutional environment.

Specifically, Holtbrügge and Baron (2013) reported their common characteristics are:

weak institutions, low levels of economic freedom, and high levels of corruption. In

addition, Holtbrügge and Baron (2013) addressed entry mode decisions based on the

political environment of BRIC countries. Although the authors did not recognize South

Africa as a member of the BRIC alliance, the relevance of their findings remains valid.

The pressure of political risks and environmental uncertainty caused by weak institutions

greatly influences the entry mode decision for businesses (Holtbrügge & Baron, 2013).

Although, Holtbrügge and Baron noted exporting to emerging market countries has

barriers and unpredictable expenses, they found exporting to be a low risk option for

entry. Also, Bortoluzzi et al. (2014) noted firms exporting to an emerging market

required more resourcefulness and additional capabilities than that required for an

advanced market.

**Defining emerging markets and the BRICS alliance.** Some researchers addressed EMEs in contexts of institutional barriers (Holtbrügge & Baron, 2013), and the common characteristics of EMEs (Bortoluzzi et al., 2014; Holtbrügge & Baron, 2013; Kearney, 2012). Most important is the combined projected growth of the gross national product of EMEs was to exceed that of all advanced economies including the United

States, Canada, and much of the European Union by 2035 (Kearney, 2012). The explosion of books, publications, and articles describing and defining the theories and suggesting future directions of the BRICS consortium indicate the importance of this cooperative.

South Africa as an emerging market has economic significance as the African gateway being an AGOA beneficiary and a member of the BRICS consortium. The countries that made up the acronym BRIC, Brazil, Russia, India, and China added South Africa as a member of the alliance in 2011 (Shaw, 2012; Tudoroiu, 2012). With South Africa as the country representing the African continent, BRICS became a cooperative covering Asia, Europe, South America, and Africa (Shaw, 2012; Tudoroiu, 2012). Although their political and social environments look dissimilar, on at least 10 points identified by Tudoroiu (2012), the five countries have significant common features that account for their alignment, including weak institutional environments (Holtbrügge & Baron, 2013). Further, the institutional dissimilarities from the United States are distinct, which create uncertainty for some U.S.-based exporters. Nevertheless, after the removal of sanctions in 1994, former Commerce Secretary, Ronald H. Brown led a trade mission to begin market development activities and resumed bilateral relations with the country (Jones & Williams, 2012). Despite the challenges of being an emerging market, U.S.-based exporters have attempted to develop a strategic foothold in South Africa that will allow access to the rest of the continent.

The phenomenon of globalization has brought out the complexities of the business world as related to trade with EMEs. The effect of globalization for some of the

BRICS and other EMEs was a positive force (Holtbrügge & Baron, 2013). Overall, a globalized, networked world provided new potential to EMEs through increasing economic development. International trade researchers noted the decreasing negative impact of geographical distance on trade (Håkanson, 2014). Firms use of communications technologies create easy access to information allowing for greater transparency of countries and political systems.

Consequently, the easy availability of information has decreased the impact of geographic distance. Further, Håkanson (2014) found there was less psychic distance with larger, more politically active countries rather than smaller countries. The findings from Håkanson confirmed earlier studies the relationship between psychic distance and geographic distance. Psychic distance is due to a lack of information such that the greater the geographic distance the less likely the individual will understand the market (Chapman, Gajewska-De Mattos, Clegg, & Buckley, 2012; Håkanson 2014; Prashantham & Floyd, 2012). Furthermore, Johanson and Vahlne (2009) found psychic distance might be a liability for the firm and a barrier to trade. The lack of market knowledge or informational separation might be due to country borders (Head & Ries, 2010), which can have a depressing effect on trade between countries.

**Culture and other trade barriers.** In some studies, exporters expressed that barriers inhibited their attempts to internationalize (Karakaya & Yannopoulos, 2012). For this reason, government programs provide exporters support by lowering businesses perceived and actual export barriers (Karakaya & Yannopoulos, 2012). Some of the



impediments to trade included tariffs, nontariff barriers, information costs, lack of distribution channels, and trade uncertainties.

Exporters experience cultural dissimilarity as a nontariff trade barrier. As a nontariff barrier, it is difficult to measure, however; it is an impediment to trade (Håkanson 2014). Cultural distance describes country differences or similarities that reflect cultural values related to those in another country (Chapman et al., 2012). Cultural distance is at the country level, and psychic distance is the narrow construct focused on the individual level (Chapman et al., 2012). When introducing a manager to a new country, the firm might be able to address the manager's psychic distance through cross-cultural training or international experience. However, cultural practices and other external barriers to trade are beyond the firm's control. In support of South Africa as the target destination for this study, there are similarities between the United States and South Africa: as Anglo countries, sharing a language and historical heritage being former British colonies (Egri et al., 2012), these similarities provide for a shorter cultural distance. Researchers use cultural distance as a construct and measurement to address problems with market entry, among other complex firm internationalization problems.

Market-specific information is necessary for marketing decisions, planning, and to determine the viability of the market. Findings in some studies showed EDOs provide services that reduce the informational barriers that affect the internationalization of firms (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2012; Head & Ries, 2010). Head and Ries (2010) considered the effect of the presence of government officials during trade missions as having a stimulating effect on trade, and theorized that trade missions reduce the lack of

knowledge that creates informational separation. Thus, EPPs address firms' lack of market-specific knowledge through research, access to a business network, and market experience.

### **Modes of Market Entry**

The process of market entry occurs over time through direct investment, distributors, strategic alliances, or other methods. Welch and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, (2014) established that internationalization occurs over time with several events. Therefore, market entry is one of a series of events in a strategic internationalization process. Behaving strategically, SMEs develop international alliances to make up for their resource shortages of finances, capacity, and some technological requirements (Brouthers et al., 2015; Tolstoy, 2012). In the new market, the SME uses its limited resources in developing network partners; thus, requiring flexibility and selectivity (Tolstoy, 2012). Subsequent to market entry, the SME uses networks and relationships (a) to understand market changes, (b) to access resources for production shortages, and (c) to identify new customer requirements. Strategic flexibility is a capability the SME uses after entering a new market to create new offerings and to enter the market differently (Tolstoy, 2012). Further, Cadogan et al. (2012) demonstrated how two sources of strategic flexibility should benefit the firm's performance in turbulent, competitive environments. Therefore, market entry is a strategic process that involves decisions about the use of resources and the most efficient manner to deploy them in potentially dynamic environments.

In this way, SMEs determine the manner to enter the market either directly or indirectly. Sandberg (2013) distinguished between entry modes that are investment-oriented methods and nodes based on relationships between the firm, the business network, or the customer. Sandberg suggested that the business network was the best point of access for small firms entering emerging markets. By using one of four nodes, the firm acquires experiential knowledge that either propels them forward to greater levels of market commitment or they remain at the initial entry node (Sandberg, 2013). Based on a sample of 197 Swedish SMEs, Sandberg found the largest share of the sample followed the process of gradual internationalization into emerging markets, starting first with the triad node using an intermediary in the foreign market. Later when exporting, some firms changed to the dyad node in the host country where they commit to the market by building knowledge. Thus, confirming Johanson and Vahlne (2009) that firms build market-specific knowledge through gradual internationalization and the business network.

Some market entry strategies include FDI, exporting or both through an international alliance. The construct of international alliances includes acquisitions, mergers, joint ventures (JVs), and market development contracts. Some SMEs use alliances as a foreign entry mode (Clarke, Tamaschke, & Liesch, 2013; Holtbrügge & Baron, 2013). Holtbrügge and Baron (2013) recognized alliances as one of the lower cost methods for rapid market entry. Further, Lavie (2006) posited international alliances could be a source of competitive advantage when the alliance provides resources as defined by RBT. Furthermore, the interconnected firm uses resources from an alliance or

as a member of a network for the firm's competitive advantage (Lavie, 2006). Moreover, Holtbrügge and Baron contended JVs benefit partners by providing easier access to countries with weak institutions and in high-risk environments. Therefore, the JV partner provides a strategic benefit by facilitating access to resources.

**Strategic alliances.** Strategic alliances come in various forms and established for various purposes. For example, Clarke et al. (2013) identified the JV as an equity-based model for foreign market entry. In another example, Brouthers et al. (2015) confirmed that SMEs establish marketing or research alliances to overcome their lack of market-specific knowledge and liabilities of foreignness. Brouthers et al. found that SMEs with an entrepreneurial orientation are better suited to develop alliances that enhance their resource deficiencies. Moreover, these entrepreneurial SMEs can leverage the resources from the alliances. Hence, international alliances can have a performance enhancing effect for firms.

Additionally, many small firms would find value in nonequity special purpose agreements. For example, network partnerships are nonequity alliances. They are nonpermanent, informal, and might be only collaborative. Network partnerships might involve a mixture of companies, and might become instrumental in delivering a product or service in a selected market (Radjou & Prabhu, 2012). Radjou and Prabhu (2012) found them to be particularly useful in emerging markets.

However, international alliances fail for a variety of reasons; often these involve cultural management issues. Lavie et al. (2012) found that nonequity alliances can be successful if the partners manage the relationships, and not interrupt the partners'

organizational processes and routines. Through their mutual trust, partners share with each other their specialized knowledge and their commitment to the relationship (Lavie et al., 2012). Otherwise, a lack of understanding of the partner and their organizational culture would create cultural ambiguity (Lavie et al., 2012). Lavie et al. noted that miscommunications, misunderstandings, and having different goals are a cause for failure in nonequity JVs. In the context of the short horizon of nonequity agreements, these causes are more critical than cultural differences.

Accordingly, Radjou and Prabhu (2012) suggested engaging the partners by establishing long-term agreements and share the strategic goals with the partners to build trust. Radjou and Prabhu noted with partners from emerging markets, a collaboration that fit within the local cultural context reduced alliance failures. Cultural management issues are important for business success. The international business operates in multiple cultural environments thus requiring sensitivity and understanding.

**Culture.** When business managers look to develop alliances, their ability to interpret and translate differences is dependent on the cultural distance (Shenkar, 2012). Specifically, cultural distance requires managing cultural differences that might challenge the manager's ability to conduct a successful business internationally. In that regard, the manager's cultural intelligence affects their ability to establish strategic alliances, negotiate with distributors and customers, and their ability to harness the productivity of the team members to successfully negotiate entry to a new market (Cadogan et al., 2012; Magnusson et al., 2013). As a component of cultural intelligence (Magnusson et al., 2013), cross-cultural competence is the individual's ability to develop an understanding

of a foreign environment and function effectively. Cross-cultural competence necessarily allows managers to successfully translate their business requirements. It is a key success component for international alliances.

### **Export Performance**

This study included the literature reviewed on performance relating to export promotion performance and export performance. Some of the studies on export promotion addressed the performance of the tools and programs used by EDOs working to encourage trade (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2012; Leonidou et al., 2011; Shamsuddoha et al., 2009). Whereas Shamsuddoha et al. (2009) noted there were few studies where researchers examined the interrelated factors of EPPs on the export performance of the firm. Considering exporting firms, I reviewed performance in the general literature on exporting rather than the performance of export programs. Identifying this distinction is crucial as I focused this study on the export performance of the SME after participating in a trade mission and looking at how the SME uses the export program to improve their export performance.

Few studies addressed export performance for firms using EPPs. In one example, Leonidou et al. (2011) in a study of exporting firms from the United Kingdom, determined EPPs enhance the firm's performance as the firm uses the EPP as an external resource. The support allows the firm to develop an effective marketing strategy, and through the implementation of the strategy, the firm can achieve a competitive advantage. Having a strategy boosts market performance and eventually financial performance (Leonidou et al., 2011). Additionally, Karakaya and Yannopoulos (2012) examined the

impact of EPPs on barriers to export. Their study of Canadian SMEs confirmed the impact of export barriers on small firms' export performance. Karakaya and Yannopoulos and Leonidou et al. provided evidence that EPPs indirectly influence export performance. Durmuşoğlu et al. (2012) showed EPPs positively affected the SME's financial performance and other dimensions of export performance.

Some of the primary determinants of export performance included: (a) managerial commitment (Navarro-García et al., 2015); (b) international experience (Clarke et al., 2013; Hilmersson, 2014a); (c) level of internationalization (Ganotakis & Love, 2012; Peiris et al., 2012); and (d) marketing capabilities (Bortoluzzi et al., 2014; Tan & Sousa, 2015). Some authors concluded the results of poor performance were due to firms lacking experiential knowledge. The SME's ability to gain market experience underscores the importance and the relevance of export promotion programs.

Throughout the extant literature on export performance, several researchers recognized the multidimensionality of the topic (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2012; Kahiya & Dean, 2014; Leonidou et al., 2011; Lu et al., 2012; Navarro-García et al., 2015; Oliveira, Cadogan, & Souchon, 2012). For this reason, Durmuşoğlu et al. (2012) and other researchers acknowledged export performance as one of the most contentious areas of exporting research. The problem was there were no agreements on measures of performance in the export performance literature making comparison studies difficult (Nemkova et al., 2012). Kahiya and Dean (2014) noted the complication of having contributions from several disciplines. Oliveira et al., (2012) addressed the conflict in determining the level of analysis, considering that most studies of export performance

address the firm. There were other levels, for example Morgan, Katsikeas, and Vorhies (2012) studied the export venture and the relationship between the export marketing strategy to export performance.

Additionally, the multifaceted content of export performance research included objective and subjective measurements (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2012), or quantitative and qualitative measures (Navarro-García et al., 2015). Measures for performance were typically objective (economic) such as sales revenues, market performance, profitability (Kaleka, 2012), and other economic indicators such as employment growth (Neville et al., 2014). For example, the performance of immigrant-owned firms explained the export performance of new (<5years) SMEs (Neville et al., 2014). Performance measures included growth in sales, employment, profits, and total salary growth. Neville et al., (2014) used Canadian survey data and longitudinal taxation data to avoid problems with subjective, self-reported data.

Subjective (non-economic) measures included two features: perceptual (Chapman et al., 2012; He et al., 2013) and self-reporting measures (Theodosiou & Katsikea, 2013). Perceptual measures are strategic as they capture management's goals that are not economic and possibly indicate certain milestones (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2012). Few studies had self-reporting measures, although commonly used for results from small firms due to not having public financial results (Anderson, 2015). Consequently, subjective measures are not consistent for firms and the results are not comparable. Oliveira et al. (2012) suggested that profit-seeking firms would find more value in studies with economic measures rather than the non-economic measures.



Additionally, I would suggest that new firms seeking to export would have an interest in non-economic measures to conceptualize their export success prior to reviewing economic performance indicators.

In the international marketing domain, the use of RBT addressed export planning, export performance, and export strategy. Specifically, Nemkova et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative multiple case study to examine the relationship between export decision-making and performance. The conceptualization of the study used a combined contingent resource-based theory. As a secondary theory, the RBT explained the use of resources, capabilities, and other contingencies in a successful decision-making process. In addition, Bortoluzzi et al. (2014) used RBT to explain the process of internationalization to emerging markets. Bortoluzzi identified three critical resources the firm required to create a competitive advantage in an emerging market: (a) international experience, (b) managerial capabilities, and (c) marketing capabilities.

Expanding research on marketing capabilities using the dynamic capabilities and competitive advantage theories, Tan and Sousa (2015) examined the relationships among marketing capabilities, competitive advantage, and the firm's export performance. Tan and Sousa found the two types of competitive advantage: low-cost and differentiation advantage contributed to superior export performance, both directly and indirectly. Tan and Sousa's findings were the exporting firm's marketing capability requirements included professional marketing skills and market knowledge for export success. Further, using these capabilities, exporters should focus on meeting the customer's product, pricing, communications, and relationship needs. As an extension of the RBT,

the dynamic capabilities theory is useful for explaining competitive advantage in markets where firms meet challenging environments and sometimes encounter uncertainty.

The export performance literature focused on SMEs included many topics such as: export promotion, export marketing, export market entry, and other general export topics. However, the focus was on the firm or the venture. Lu et al. (2012) was one of few recent studies that addressed the influence of managerial export commitment on export performance. Also, Lu et al. presented one of few qualitative studies that addressed export performance by interviewing managers of service firms.

Export performance is a complex topic affecting many dimensions of firms. There is room still in the literature to include topics that address export promotion such as the influence of the EPP on the manager's knowledge and skills, or managerial perceptions of performance after using an EPP. Leonidou et al. (2011) suggested further research should involve a qualitative study to examine different types of EPPs in comparison to specific types of resources and capabilities. To address some of these issues, I designed this study to explore how trade missions affect SMEs' resources, capabilities, and their performance.

### **Literature Related to Qualitative Methods in International Business**

As a discipline, international business, dated by Dunning's published study in 1958, is a relatively young field (Devinney et al., 2013). The preponderance of studies was data-driven, quantitative research, as confirmed in this literature review. Welch and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki (2014) identified the case study was the predominant qualitative method for international business studies; through this review I confirm those findings.

Mixed methods were not common for international business studies (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013). For these reasons, I verify the need for this qualitative study.

Using the interpretive paradigm in international business research can provide a contextualization of business problems with rich, descriptive text data to capture the individuals' understanding of the phenomena (Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2014). The explicit position of the researcher addresses the question of credibility in qualitative research; it creates credible and confirmable studies when the process is transparent (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). As an additional benefit, qualitative research provides context to studies by including description and interpretations (Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2014), which numerical data from quantitative research does not provide.

In this literature review, there were few recent (within the past 5 years) qualitative studies using RBT to address small firms accessing international markets using government support. As of the date of this study, no authors used RBT to explain trade mission performance issues for the U.S.-based SME. With these considerations, use of the RBT in this study was to explain the export performance of the U.S. SME participant, as a member of the trade mission delegation.

### **Transition and Summary**

In this literature review, I included studies from several streams of export promotion and export performance literature. This review flowed from my research question, which queried the strategies SME leaders required to export successfully after a trade mission. In the sections on economic development, I introduced literature on SME internationalization, export promotion, and EPPs, including trade missions. The sections

on firm characteristics and knowledge resources, market characteristics, and international business alliances I addressed the factors that effect export performance, mostly from the RBT perspective. Further, I reviewed the literature on export performance.

This literature review justified the need to conduct this study: the lack of literature to answer the qualitative aspect of my business problem. I wanted to understand why some SME leaders fail to export after participating in a trade mission. Section 2 provides details on the nature of the study, participants, and the project plan. Section 3 contains the results of a thematic analysis of the data, including the application of the results to professional practice, implications for social change, and recommendations for action.

## Section 2: The Project

Governments initiate trade mission events and travel to foreign countries to promote their region (McMillan, 2012). In using these promotional opportunities, business representatives use trade missions for introductions to new markets to export their products or services. The literature review for this study showed that SME owners have mixed records of success in exporting after a trade mission. Additionally, there were no current qualitative studies preceding this study addressing trade missions to emerging markets. Consequently, my research question addressed a relevant business problem.

In Section 2, I detail the research plan for this qualitative descriptive study. Included is (a) my involvement as the researcher and role in the study, (b) the research method and design, (c) identification of the participants, (d) population sampling, (e) data collection, and (f) data analysis method. I used in-depth interviews and document reviews to understand the perspectives of the 22 study participants. The unit of analysis was the U.S. SME trade mission participant; they described their experiences in participating in a trade mission event through semistructured interviews. In addition, I conducted document analysis of photos, brochures, forms, news clippings, and Internet webpages.

I conducted a qualitative study with a qualitative descriptive design. The research plan included a prepilot approach that informed my process for accessing participants and informed consent. Following this, I presented my process of identifying the participants through purposive sampling of my business network. Additionally, I explained the

snowball sampling method that supplemented the purposive sampling. The data collection plan addressed the process to conduct telephone interviews, transcription, and interviewee transcript review. The data analysis method was a thematic analysis that began with data coding using Transana qualitative analysis software. Data analysis concluded after the presentation of the proposed themes to the participants for member checking. Section 2, also include qualitative methods for ensuring reliability through data saturation, and validity through transcript review, member checking, and methodological triangulation; thus presenting the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the strategies that SME leaders require to successfully export their goods and services after a trade mission. The study population consisted of U.S. SME representatives who attended a trade mission to an EME, specifically South Africa. For this study, interviews of 22 business representatives provided data that included descriptions of their experiences attending a trade mission to South Africa.

The results of this study are intended to positively affect practices for preparing SME exporters, executing trade missions, and addressing follow-up issues. Additionally, the findings and recommendations are presented to promote the creation of customized export programs for SMEs. Consequently, participants' ability to export after a trade mission to an emerging market will improve as the participants are better prepared to represent their firm in the foreign market. The social impact of this study will be more

SME's becoming exporters benefiting their communities through increased tax provisions and jobs.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher, my role was to ensure the reliable collection and analysis of data and ensure the responsible management of it. In conducting a qualitative descriptive study (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010), I gathered the many perspectives of the participants and revealed their diverse versions of the trade mission event through thematic analysis. By using various tools, methods, and techniques, a patchwork composition emerged. In conducting this research, I combined methods that were appropriate for presenting the research. Finally, I contributed to an understanding of the contextual reality of SME representatives participating in a trade mission.

My research has been significantly shaped by my prestudy experiences, which influenced my observations and interpretations. I have significant professional experience with trade missions; my experiences with trade missions began in 1997, when I attended an event in South Africa for a trade delegation from the United States. There were many U.S. trade missions to South Africa after 1993, following the U.S. government's removal of sanctions and resumption of trade relations. Some of the delegates from these trade missions became my clients after they returned to the U.S. disillusioned that they had not made a sale. Later, I worked with U.S. state agencies and businesses providing market access through trade missions, consulting services, and managing an overseas office for the U.S. state of Florida. Consequently, my work

experience and life in South Africa contributed an understanding to the study participants' meanings and the context of their trade mission to South Africa.

As a qualitative researcher, I was the data collection instrument for the interviews and documents, and I developed the literature-based questions. Petty, Thomson, and Stew (2012b) stated that qualitative researchers have an explicit position in the study. In some cases, there may be biases the researcher brings to the study particularly when the researcher has a personal experience with the phenomenon (Rennie, 2012). However, the measures I took to ensure rigor and mitigate bias in the data collection process were through a pre-pilot study and reflexive approach according to Chenail (2011). In addition, using an interview guide (Draper & Swift, 2011), I used a semistructured interview format. As a guided conversation, the semistructured format has open-ended questions to encourage the participant to provide a description of the phenomenon (Rowley, 2012). While conducting the pilot interview, I addressed questions about the acceptability of the interview protocol and determined my readiness and capability of conducting the study.

The researcher identifies and mitigates biases by recording interview and methodological notes before and after interviews (Greene, 2014; Hunter Revell, 2013; Tessier, 2012). During the research process, I practiced reflexive journaling using these procedures (Chenail, 2011; Greene, 2014). Secondly, these records provided an audit trail demonstrating the process I used to reach the research findings (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). In the end, the knowledge gathered from the participants through interviews and using interpretive methods reflected my notions of reality, as I was a part of the process.



The qualitative descriptive method provides a research tool for the expression of the participant and the observer. Interviews and documentation review are data collection methods for gaining insights into a phenomenon (Rowley, 2012). I specifically chose an in-depth interview method to explore the individual experiences of the trade mission participant. In this process, I reviewed and transcribed the data collected from participants of several U.S. trade missions to South Africa using Transana, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). The trade missions that I accepted data for were from the years 1993 to 2013.

I recorded the interviews using digital audio recorders; capturing the entire interview ensured the proper recognition of the participants' voices (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). I made verbatim transcripts, created a table of themes, and then provided these to the participants for review in an empathetic approach to involving them in the process (Torrance, 2012). Moreover, using procedures that confirmed informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality of the research participant (McCormack et al., 2012; Stellefson, Paige, Alber, Barry, & James, 2015), I conducted this study following ethical principles.

Having a variety of interview participants who attended different trade missions allowed for the comparison of types of trade missions, documents, and for maximum variation (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). As Denzin (2012) noted, researchers use methodological triangulation to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Accordingly, the data sources for this study included interviews, documents including mission reports, news clippings, forms, and photos. In addition, I collected documents

from state EDOs, other trade mission participants, and the U.S. Foreign Commercial Service Office in Johannesburg, South Africa. Through this study, I sought to interpret the experiences of the trade mission participant. Therefore, as in Hanna (2012), I offered the participants the choice of research methods to ensure that I reached an adequate sample of the population and that I captured the essence of the phenomenon.

### **Participants**

Trade missions comprise delegations of various sizes that include representatives from: (a) business, (b) elected officials and their staff, (c) government departments, (d) chambers of commerce, (e) educational institutions, (f) government-owned resources such as seaports or airports, and (g) industry associations. Business participation varies from the very small firm to the large multinational enterprise. The definition of a U.S. small and medium business enterprise (SME) included businesses of 500 or fewer employees (Small Business Administration, 2014). The small firm is a subset of the SME (Gilmore et al., 2013). The research participants for this study were the business representatives that fit in the SME category. In addition, there were representatives of private foundations seeking business opportunities.

The participants included representatives of companies that participated in a trade mission to South Africa. The trade mission types included: (a) city or county, (b) state events, (c) U.S. Commerce trade missions that were not a presidential state visit, (d) governor-led trade missions, (e) chamber of commerce or (f) an industry association visit. I used the snowball sampling method as described by Goodman (2011), Handcock and Gile (2011), and Heckathorn (2011) to identify the participants. Using this method, I

employed the recommendations of people who previously organized or managed trade missions to South Africa. First, I selected sources from my network using purposive sampling, per the guidelines of Draper and Swift (2011), Lucas (2012), and Silverman (2010). These sources consisted of: (a) former directors of U.S. states' overseas foreign trade offices in South Africa, (b) the U.S. Department of Commerce Foreign Commercial Service offices in South Africa, (c) state and county economic development offices, (d) people who had participated in a trade mission, and (e) Americans currently living or had previously lived in South Africa.

Gatekeepers control and assist in accessing potential research subjects (Darbi & Hall, 2014; Draper & Swift, 2011; Goldman & Swayze, 2012). The gatekeepers that I contacted assisted in my accessing business representatives who participated in trade missions to South Africa after 1993. I identified 2013 being the latest trade mission for this study. The dates of the first research interviews were first quarter 2014 to allow for the time lag suggested by Spence (2003) for sales results and development of the manager's competency.

The unit of analysis of this study was the SME trade mission participating firm. I interviewed CEOs, managers, sales representatives, and other company representatives who had experience with the phenomenon. Poulis, Poulis, and Plakoyiannaki (2013) and Silverman (2010), stated the unit of analysis represents the boundaries of the study, specifically noting the focus of the research. Due to the cultural focus of international business, the unit of analysis of these studies included cross-cultural groups, managers and multinational teams (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). Traditionally, with international

business, export performance, and resource-based studies the level of analysis was the firm (Lu et al., 2012; Oliveira et al., 2012; Wernerfelt, 1984). In this study, the participating firm representative provided the qualitative data.

For ethical practices, the researcher informs the potential participants of the parameters of the study through a process of informed consent (McCormack et al., 2012; Qu & Dumay, 2011; Stellefson et al., 2015). When the potential interviewee indicated their interest, I emailed a consent agreement document describing the study, indicating how I would manage their confidentiality, and requested their consent to participate in the study (see Appendix A). I used telephone, email, and other social media extensively to maintain contact and manage the working relationship with the participants.

## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

Qualitative methods address questions that relate to how a phenomenon occurs and why it occurs (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013; Kahlke, 2014; Qu & Dumay, 2011). Following a review of the literature, I posed the research question used to guide this study was: What strategies do SME leaders require to export successfully after a trade mission? This exploratory question addressed my interest in understanding the participants' experience with trade missions. My interest was to understand their strategies for participation in the event. Additionally, I was interested in how the experience affected their export plans, and their success in accomplishing the organizational strategic goals. Using a qualitative research strategy can answer these exploratory questions.

Each researcher brings a personal history and manner of thinking into their research process; consequently, the research choices reveal their ontological, epistemological, and methodological stance. Therefore, it is the researcher's obligation to state their epistemological perspective. My philosophical beliefs follow constructivist assumptions that the individual engages in meaning making, and acquire knowledge through experience (Lee, 2012; Petty et al., 2012a). Within this understanding, my beliefs in conducting this study followed the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the constructivist or interpretivist perspective, as described by researchers Denzin and Lincoln (2011), Petty et al. (2012a), and Scotland (2012).

The qualitative researcher has many perspectives through which to interpret the experience of the phenomenon. Because each person might pose the same problem differently, hence, the various qualitative designs such as phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and the case study methods. Some writers of qualitative textbooks identified other approaches, for example, Merriam (2014) added three others that included narrative analysis, basic qualitative, and critical qualitative designs. These qualitative designs provide the means for the researcher to interpret and understand the meaning people make of phenomena. Denzin (2012) aptly described how the qualitative researcher seeks out multiple perspectives to see them through different viewpoints. In this manner, the qualitative researcher attempts to interpret the social experience to address the *what*, *how*, and *why* of it.

Therefore, the qualitative researcher uses various interpretive practices to describe and provide a better understanding of the subject. Specifically, using interpretive

methodologies, the qualitative researcher seeks to capture how individuals understand the reality they know and how they interpret the phenomena that makes up their world (Scotland, 2012). Moreover, through some level of interpretation, researchers present an understanding that reflects the participant's meaning and their individual actions (Lamb et al., 2011). In this regard, the qualitative researcher thinks they get closer to the individual's understanding by personally connecting with the phenomenon, through interviewing and observation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Additionally, the researcher explicitly interprets the data with the subsequent result revealing a story told in the qualitative research tradition.

In comparison, the quantitative researcher looks at objects through remote methods that appear to be more objective than the qualitative methods (Scotland, 2012). Quantitative refers to the measurement and analysis of relationships between variables, compared to qualitative, which refers to qualities such as meaning. The quantitative researcher uses measures, probabilities, and randomization to evaluate phenomena (Petty et al., 2012a). The postpositivist paradigm associated with quantitative research seeks to eliminate bias as the postpositivist researcher asserts that human's perceptions of reality reflect their partiality and bias (Merriam, 2014). Postpositivists argue reality is only approximate. Therefore, postpositivism emphasizes the discovery and verification of theories for quantifying data and enabling generalizations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Petty et al., 2012a). Through these generalizations, the quantitative researcher seeks validity and reliability within value-free findings. In comparison, the constructivist paradigm relates how individuals construct meaning through their different ways of interpreting

behaviors and events (Lee, 2012). In that regard, qualitative research is multivoiced and value-bound.

The qualitative researcher interprets what the participant sees, hears, or experiences. Therefore, the researcher's role in the qualitative study is explicit as the researcher is the principle instrument. Being part of the process, the researcher, admits biases, values, and a background that reveal subjectivity. Graebner, Martin, and Roundy (2012) identified three distinctive characteristics of qualitative data. Such that, it is open-ended and often described as *flexible* or *exploratory* in that the researcher poses open-ended questions during interviews to explore participants' understandings. Second, the data are vivid and concrete. Third, the data are rich and nuanced. Consequently, researchers use a qualitative approach when the research question requires details of the event or the phenomenon, which a quantitative study cannot provide. The quantitative approach was not appropriate for my research question; mine was not a correlational study or one that tested a theory.

When researchers conduct a quantitative study of a phenomenon, they develop measures to quantify the constructs in the theoretical hypotheses. The numerical measurements are for the analysis and interpretation of relationships in a manner to understand the phenomenon. Using a quantitative method for this study was not appropriate because I was not collecting numerical data, unlike most articles on trade missions and export promotion that required trade statistics or sales results. For this study, the statistical information would not provide the explanation the research question required. In quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics presents the data in a simplified

form and allow for generalizations (Scotland, 2012). However, quantitative descriptions lose the contextualization that a qualitative description can provide.

In the literature review, many of the quantitative studies included surveys with generalizable results based on large databases. With this study, the participants' responses, rich with information, cover the spectrum of experiences that cover the breadth and depth of the phenomena (Anderson & Ullah, 2014; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Compared to quantitative studies, most qualitative studies involve small samples. Based on the literature review, most research studies on trade, export promotion, and exporting were quantitative studies.

The mixed methods approach combines both quantitative and qualitative research strategies reducing the need to choose between either one or the other, thus, integrating them into a third methodological option. Observed from the pragmatic worldview, the researcher using the mixed methods approach assumes that the research question is more important than the method or paradigm (Denzin, 2012). Denzin (2012) stated it produced a more developed study, and the researcher might capture some of the issues that would not be apparent through a single method. Molina-Azorin (2012) found in strategy research, based on the number of citations received, mixed methods studies were more impactful than monomethods. Further, mixed method research has an application in triangulation for convergence or collaboration of study results (Molina-Azorin, 2012). Methodological triangulation for example, involves multiple qualitative methods. Furthermore, Denzin supported using mixed methods within the qualitative inquiry community as a triangulation strategy.



There are advantages and disadvantages of using the mixed methods approach. The advantages are the researcher can approach the question from different angles, thereby reducing the weaknesses and complementing the strengths found in one separate approach (Torrance, 2012). For example, having a qualitative component provides context to the study (Molina-Azorin, 2012). Some of the disadvantages of using mixed methods related to increased cost or time implications (Molina-Azorin, 2012), the space for publications (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013), and the increased complexity of the study (Molina-Azorin, 2012).

The research question for my study required an in-depth understanding of the perspective of the business representatives participating in a trade mission. I sought to explore their decision-making process about participating in and preparation for the trade mission. My research question did not require numerical analysis or the comparison of variables. Whereas, most studies of export promotion were quantitative, the qualitative understanding, adding context to the problem was missing in the literature. Therefore, in this study, I explored the business problem that some SME leaders lack strategies to export after a trade mission. The research question required an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon for which a qualitative study using method triangulation was appropriate. Denzin (2012) suggested a qualitative mixed method approach as a valuable research strategy for adding rigor to the study and gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Torrance (2012) concurred by suggesting that triangulation would make the study fuller and more rounded.

From this perspective, the researcher has multiple tools and techniques to present interpretations from several vantage points. Considering that qualitative research is an exploration of complex human and social issues (Lucas, 2012), I explored the perceptions of the trade mission participant through interviews and conducted document analysis to triangulate the results. Using interpretive techniques allowed me to describe the meaning and interpret the participants' understanding of the trade mission experience and, consequently, answered the research question.

### **Research Design**

The research design is the plan that describes the researcher's intention for the process of developing the study. It describes the chosen strategy of inquiry. In qualitative research, these include case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography, and other basic or generic qualitative approaches. Merriam (2014) called qualitative research generic, basic, and interpretive. Generic qualitative approaches include qualitative description and interpretive descriptive approaches (Kahlke, 2014). As defined by Sandelowski (2000), a qualitative descriptive study contains an eclectic combination of research designs such that some studies mimic elements of other designs. However, because of its flexibility, Merriam went on to state, that the most common type of qualitative research is a basic, interpretive study.

Jackson and Mazzei (2013) described the qualitative method as a forum that provides a place for the participants of a phenomenon to voice their truth and reflect the meaning of their experience. In this regard, I used a basic qualitative descriptive design as described by Sandelowski (2000, 2010) and Kahlke (2014), to make present the voice

of the SME trade mission participant in the literature on export promotion programs using a strategy framework. I conducted semistructured, in-depth telephone interviews with the participants (Block & Erskine, 2012; Qu & Dumay, 2011; Rowley, 2012; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). Additionally, I used thematic analysis to find patterns in the data to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Joffe, 2011). Using these methods, I derived meaning through interpretation of the trade mission participant's understanding of the event. Using a qualitative descriptive design, I described a phenomenon studied in a natural environment, through interviews with individuals who experienced a trade mission to South Africa. Through themes, I interpreted the meaning they ascribed to the event.

The other qualitative research designs: the case study, ethnographic, grounded theory, or phenomenology were not suitable for this study. First, the case study method, although it is common across business disciplines, it was not appropriate. Similarly, as with other qualitative designs, the case study contributes to understanding complex phenomenon by explaining *how* or *why* it works (Yin, 2013). The researcher uses an in-depth interview; however, the case study method is an exploration of a single event, a program, or a process. My study did not focus on a single U.S. state's trade mission to South Africa as I interviewed participants who attended different events hosted by various U.S. organizations.

Yin (2013) advocated case studies when examining contemporary events, and when the researcher cannot manipulate the participants or the phenomenon. Some of the defining features of the case study are the boundaries of the case as an identifiable means

of stating the unit of analysis (Hyett et al., 2014). The case study is a flexible design in that researchers use different data collection methods, in a qualitative or quantitative study (Hyett et al., 2014). When used qualitatively, case studies are contextualized. Poulis et al. (2013) noted the positivist focus of international business case studies created a lack of contextualization.

Another defining feature of the case study method is the use of multiple sources of data collection to present a fully detailed case (Yin, 2013). McLeay and Andersen (2010) provided an example of a case study in export promotion. The bounded event was a trade mission program managed by the Montana World Trade Center. Multiple sources of data included reports, news clippings, interviews, observations, and photos. The Montana program was a longitudinal study where the researchers observed several trade missions. Nevertheless, this approach did not fit my study due to the randomness of trade mission events that various states and the federal government organized to South Africa.

Secondly, researchers using the ethnographical method describe the patterns of a cultural group where the researcher embeds in the group over time to understand the phenomenon and the participants' social value commitments (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013). One concern of ethnographers is with diversity within the group such as people representing different countries in a work place. For Chapman, Gajewska-De Mattos, Clegg, and Buckley (2012) the study included 63 managers representing Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom. The individual managers and their cultural perceptions were the focus of the study. In an ethnographic study concerning online groups, Hallett and Barber (2014) challenged the traditional route of collecting observational data by

expanding the definition of the place as *the space* through recognition of cyberspace as a legitimate venue. Ethnographic studies used data collection methods including interviews and document reviews (McEwen & Scheaffer, 2012). However, the principle longitudinal engagement of the researcher is in the place or space to observe the phenomenon.

The grounded theorist seeks to discover theory, which was not appropriate for my study. Underpinned by constructivist assumptions, the grounded theory process is exploratory, as the researcher seeks to understand the human experience through interview data. Qualitative researchers conduct interviews and make observations; the construction of the theory comes from the participants' interview data (Duncan & Holtslander, 2012; Petty et al., 2012b). The data collection techniques for grounded theory do not involve in-depth interviews, although, Sonenshein, (2014) conducted 60 brief interviews, the duration was from 30 to 60 minutes. Duncan and Holtslander (2012) only conducted 11 short interviews. However, for my study, the in-depth interviews from which deep explorations of the individuals' experiences and the descriptive meaning associated with that event enabled me to address my study's purpose and research questions.

Within phenomenology, there are two different paths for conducting research. The significant difference between them is the descriptive or interpretive focus (Gill, 2014). Husserl focused on the *relationship* between the knower, the subject, and the thing that is knowable; hence, the researcher using this form required *bracketing* of preconceptions (Finlay, 2014). However, for Heidegger, the focus was *the what* that

made things come into being in the first place and situated inquiries from an ontological approach (Gill, 2014). Heidegger recognized that the researcher uses background and history to make an interpretation (Finlay, 2014). The concept of historicity refers to all that encompasses the background of the past, present, and future that an individual would use to form an interpretation of the lived experience (Finlay, 2014). Interpretation is the manner in which humans make sense of their world; hence, interpretations are integral in the study of human beings (Finlay, 2014; Gill, 2014). In that regard, the Heideggerian concept of historicity informed my approach to interpreting meaning from the trade mission participants' interviews, although phenomenology was not the best choice for describing the trade mission event.

The lived experience of small firm owners during their internationalization process provides valuable understandings to international business research (Lamb et al., 2011). Rooted in phenomenological philosophy and the concept of the lifeworld, Lamb et al. (2011) used phenomenography to identify the variations in which owner-managers understood their internationalization process. Unlike the rational paradigm, Lamb et al. asserted, the world could not be dualistically described separately from the human; particularly, with small firm internationalization where the manager is usually the owner. Noting the paucity of interpretive studies in international business research, Lamb et al. saw interpretive methods as the bridge between the rationalist approach and the relativist understanding of the lived world. The phenomenography approach explained the variations in the internationalizing firm's actions and processes. However, the addition of another phenomenological or phenomenographic study would not necessarily provide

a new perspective to international business research. Rather the qualitative description of the trade mission event aided with identifying and characterizing the participants' themes and for contextualizing the study, thus expanding my understanding of SMEs' experiences in exporting.

**Qualitative description.** There are many ways to conduct qualitative research. I use a qualitative descriptive approach (Sandelowski 2000) to explore the disparate experiences of a group of unconnected trade mission participants to describe how they addressed their export challenges. None of the quantitative studies presented in the literature review captured their experiences. Therefore, the goal of this study was not to provide generalizations with large samples of hundreds or thousands of firms. In comparison, the qualitative researcher utilizes small samples to address the complexity of the issue by focusing on the people with the relevant knowledge (Rapley, 2014; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Appropriately, the focus of this study was to provide the depth of the trade mission experience.

The criterion established in the qualitative international business literature with small samples is in case study research. For example, Nemkova et al. (2012) with 11 exporters. Additionally, Fletcher and Harris (2012) conducted a multiple case study with 10 actively internationalizing SMEs. The sample sizes for a qualitative descriptive approach were similar to other qualitative studies. For example, a qualitative descriptive study by Holsten, Deatrick, Kumanyika, Pinto-Martin, and Compher (2012) included 47 youths; another study by Baldwin et al. (2015) included 18 youth. I determined from this variety of studies an initial sample of 20 interviews.

As Sandelowski (2000) suggested, the sample should provide for maximum variation (Kahlke, 2014; Sandelowski, 2010). For this study, participants provided for maximum variation based on business size and age, and the level of international experience of the participants. The qualitative researcher searches for saturation of the concept representing the phenomenon of interest (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Rapley, 2014). The saturation occurs when additional interviews would not provide new concepts (Trotter, 2012) or new themes (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Therefore, using maximum variation the researcher can meet the goals of the study, as well as ensuring the validity of the results.

Sandelowski (2010) stated there is no other name that acknowledges the diversity the qualitative descriptive researcher uses. Namely, qualitative descriptive studies involve purposive sampling, focus groups, individual interviews, or observation in a naturalist setting (Merriam, 2014; Sandelowski, 2010). In this manner, I conducted semistructured interviews with participants identified through purposive sampling for the index individuals followed by a snowball sample process. Additionally, researchers use either content analysis or thematic analysis as the data analysis method for qualitative descriptive studies (Sandelowski, 2010). Often, thematic analysis in various forms, occur in descriptive and interpretive phenomenological studies (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). However, using a qualitative description approach, the researcher uses thematic analysis to make interpretations that use the language of the data to tell the story (Sandelowski, 2010). Comparatively, a researcher uses phenomenology to describe the lived experience of participants. The researcher interprets the data by capturing both



explicit and implicit meaning, as such reading into the data to make an interpretation beyond it (Finlay, 2014). A qualitative description, according to Sandelowski, is not as interpretive as phenomenology when the researcher stays close to the data.

Using a qualitative description design, I provided a comprehensive description of the trade mission experience using the participants' words to define themes relating to the event. With thematic analysis, repetitive patterns found in the data reflect themes that allow for answering the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this case, through multiple reviews of the participants' interview data, I identified the commonalities of the participants' experiences.. Therefore, the qualitative descriptive approach provided flexibility to capture the participants' voices in describing the event and understanding the phenomenon. Moreover, Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas (2013) noted using a qualitative descriptive approach allows the researcher flexibility and produces reliable findings. As a result, I presented a description of trade mission participation for U.S. SME representatives and presented findings that addressed the research question.

### **Population and Sampling**

The researcher in a qualitative study gathers in-depth information about the phenomenon from the study participants. Sampling for qualitative studies require small samples because the focus is on a specific concept, as compared to quantitative studies that require large samples to provide for generalizations (Trotter, 2012). Therefore, with a quantitative study, a sampling frame is necessary to identify a research sample (Draper & Swift, 2011; Heckathorn, 2011; Trotter, 2012). The sampling frame, a standard method for determining populations, is a list, a map, or some identification of the people

that fit the parameters of the study (Draper & Swift, 2011). For example, Neville et al. (2014) identified a large sampling frame consisting of 34,509 Canadian firms to identify 132 immigrant business owners. Goodman (2011) referred to a hard-to-reach population as one that does not have a sampling frame, as it might be too expensive to create one. Trotter (2012) noted, in qualitative research, the focus is on the sampling process rather than the number count.

For this study, it was not possible to develop a sampling frame because of the complexities of the population and considering the variety of U. S. organizations that conduct trade missions. The population for this study included U.S. business representatives who participated in a trade mission to South Africa from 1993 to 2013. During that period, the types of trade missions varied: Government agencies, chambers of commerce, other EDOs, or promotion organizations organized them. Additionally, the trade missions to South Africa varied in size from very small groups of less than five business representatives to large groups of thirty or more participants. For populations that are difficult to estimate such as this conglomeration of trade missions, and are hard-to-reach, the researcher might use an exploratory sample (Goodman, 2011; Handcock & Gile, 2011; Heckathorn, 2011; Trotter, 2012). For this reason, with this qualitative research project, I selected an exploratory sample, rather than a representative or random sample.

Typically, qualitative researchers use exploratory samples to gather new insights about an unexplored topic (Trotter, 2012). The sampling plan for qualitative research requires decisions on the participants of the study and how many people to recruit.

Hence, the sampling plan for this study included the sampling method, the sample size, the plan to access and recruit participants, and the process of obtaining informed consent.

### **Sampling Method**

Sampling methods for research include probability, purposive, theoretical, convenience, snowball, and respondent-driven sampling (RDS). Probability sampling is most often associated with quantitative research for the calculation of a statistically representative population (Draper & Swift, 2011). Comparatively, the goal of qualitative sampling is to identify the knowledge-holders: the people who have experience with the phenomenon (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Rapley, 2014; Trotter, 2012). In that regard, the qualitative researcher focuses on the phenomenon of interest with a small sample.

Therefore, the sample for a qualitative study focuses on the information gathered from individuals rather than, for example, the general population of trade mission participants.

In qualitative research, the goals and purpose of the study determine the sampling method. With purposive sampling, selection of the participants is because of their relevance and knowledge of the topic and ability to speak on the topic (Draper & Swift, 2011; Lucas, 2012; Silverman, 2010). These purposively selected participants provide responses rich in data, in relation to the research goals (Draper & Swift, 2011). The use of theoretical sampling, commonly employed in the grounded theory method, is for the selection of participants to identify data for the development of theory (Draper & Swift, 2011; Petty et al., 2012b). Convenience sampling relies on chance or an opportunity to access participants (Rapley, 2014), such as accessing shoppers at a mall.

Snowball sampling, described formally by Coleman in 1958 (Goodman, 2011), is a method of interviewing the social network of the researcher or the participants to generate the sample (Draper & Swift, 2011; Handcock & Gile, 2011), from which the participants begin to cumulate like a snowball (Lucas, 2012). Illenberger and Flötteröd (2012) also called this the chain-referral or link-tracing method. RDS, based on link-tracing sampling, is another method for studying hard-to-reach populations (Goodman, 2011; Heckathorn, 2011). Though the process of RDS begins with convenience sampling, the objective is to develop a probability sample (Handcock & Gile, 2011). By introducing randomness in the process, RDS does not suffer from the bias that is problematic for snowball sampling. The purpose of the sample for this study was to conduct qualitative research; therefore, the RDS method was not appropriate.

Snowball sampling has become a technique in qualitative research (Heckathorn, 2011; Trotter, 2012), and has applications in business research. For example, Chapman et al. (2012) used snowball sampling in an interpretive study to identify 63 managers with experience in the relevant topic. For this study, I chose the snowball sampling method to identify the participants, following Goodman's (2011) definition of the term, snowball sampling for hard-to-reach populations. Additionally, Heckathorn (2011) noted sampling hard-to-reach or hidden populations is difficult. The sampling frames are infeasible to construct for hard-to-reach populations because the population is relatively small, geographically dispersed, or have networks that are difficult to penetrate by outsiders (Goodman, 2011; Handcock & Gile, 2011; Heckathorn, 2011). The participants of trade

missions to South Africa were hard-to-reach as they might have participated in a trade mission up to 19 years before conducting this study.

There were several reasons the participants of trade missions to South Africa were a hard-to-reach population. My criteria included participants who were in a trade mission delegation after 1993. Consequently, some participants were difficult to find. As well, I could not locate some of the people. Most notably, the confidentiality agreements between EDOs and their clients were difficult to work around, whether they were implicit or explicit. In addition, managing the confidentiality of the referring individuals' names confounded the search of people who had the experience but would not respond to my communications. In some instances, I had the name of the participating firm; however, I did not have the name of the participant. Therefore, I used an introductory letter (see Appendix B), and requested the recipient forward the letter to the person who could best speak to the experience. For these reasons, snowball sampling was appropriate for this hard-to-reach population.

Nonetheless, the snowball process moved forward as described by Heckathorne (2011). The process began with purposive sampling of my business network. After the first contact with the seeds (Heckathorne, 2011) or index individuals (Trotter, 2012), some of them provided referrals and documents listing trade mission participants. Some of the *wave 1* contacts agreed to participate in the study, and some of them referred other people. I reached the *wave 2* people in the same manner. Some of the *wave 2* contacts agreed to participate, and some of them referred other people. The process continued as each wave of contacts provided more names. The result was a cascading effect as it

rolled through other waves until the referrals accumulated to 23 participants. Through the interviews of the 23 participants, I achieved saturation with rich data and there were no additional codes or new themes.

### **Sample Size**

There were many trade missions to South Africa that occurred from 1993 to 2013, but because of the variety of organizations that conduct them, there was no conceivable method to develop the sample frame: There was no U.S. agency that recorded the outbound trade missions and no South African agency that recorded the inbound trade missions. Focusing on one state or a single agency might limit the number of people available for the sample. Consequently, with the aim of identifying participants objectively, I used a purposive sample of my business network to begin a snowball process through which I expected to find a population large enough to recruit the interview participants. I contacted people from various organizations to ensure maximum variation.

In qualitative research, the sample size of a study depends on the research goals, the research design, the interview subject matter (Rapley, 2014), and sources of data (Fusch & Ness, 2015; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). In this regard, sampling is a strategic activity in the research process (Rapley, 2014). Specifically, for qualitative research there are two considerations: what is appropriate for the study, and what is adequate to answer the research question (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Trotter, 2012). Therefore, qualitative samples must be large enough to reveal most of the perceptions that might be relevant to the population they represent. For example, Lamb et al. (2011) had 22

business owners for the phenomenographic study, and Chapman et al. (2012) had 63 managers in their ethnographic study.

Accordingly, researchers use saturation and other criteria to determine sample size. Glaser and Strauss introduced the concept of theoretical saturation to qualitative research in 1967 (Draper & Swift, 2011; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). They noted the data saturation point occurred when no new additional datum was necessary to develop the categories or themes. In grounded theory, the use of theoretical saturation is to determine the point when a theory might emerge. O'Reilly and Parker (2012) stated there are different uses for theoretical and thematic or data saturation. With other qualitative methods, data saturation occurs when there are fewer *surprises*, and there are no additional emergent themes in the data, or when interviewing additional participants would not provide new information or problems on the phenomenon (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Researchers determine that sampling is complete when there are no additional codes or themes revealed through the qualitative data collection method. For these reasons, as argued by Fusch and Ness (2015), qualitative research benefits from multiple data collection methods that the researcher uses to triangulate the findings.

Using the criterion established in the qualitative literature, I interviewed 23 research participants for this qualitative study. The key sampling criteria considered for this study included: (a) the status as a U.S. business, (b) the size of the business at the time of the trade mission, and (c) experience as a business participant in a trade mission to South Africa from between 1993 to 2013. In this study, I focused on the participants' experience on a trade mission. Therefore, my concern was not with age, gender,

education, and other typical demographics because they were not relevant to the study. Instead, I found participants who were willing to provide adequate time to conduct an in-depth interview; additionally, a few of these interviews extended beyond one session.

I determined the initial analysis sample to be 20 interviews based on sample sizes in qualitative international business studies and qualitative descriptive studies. O'Reilly and Parker (2012) called this the *corpus* and Trotter (2012) identified it as the *power analysis* that is common for quantitative studies. Further, the a priori stopping criterion is the number of interviews beyond the initial sample interviews for data saturation (Illenberger & Flötteröd, 2012; Rapley, 2015). Therefore, I determined the stopping criteria to be three additional beyond the first 20 interviews. The interview of participant 20 provided new information; consequently, I conducted a further three interviews to ensure theme saturation.

### **Plan to Access and Recruit Participants**

I purposively sampled my business network as the first level of contacts. The first level contacts are the genesis for the snowball sampling process (Heckathorne, 2011; Illenberger & Flötteröd, 2012; Trotter, 2012). This genesis network included the initial gatekeepers; defined by the literature as people who might manage access to target individuals (Darbi & Hall, 2014; Draper & Swift, 2011; Goldman & Swayze, 2012). These gatekeepers were people who had recruited trade mission participants in the past, managed a trade mission visit, or participated in a trade mission. The second segment of gatekeepers included directors and staff of U.S. EDOs. Some U.S. state laws required confidentiality of their client database, therefore, these gatekeepers directed me to other



people or websites. Some contacts emailed trade mission brochures that listed the names and photographs of trade mission participants. Additionally, some of the information was available on public records. Another segment included people who currently or previously lived in South Africa. As well, I contacted the South African Embassy based in Washington, the South African Department of Trade and Industry, and other South African agencies that received trade missions from the United States. I captured the snowballing process in MS Word document tables including the initial contact date, follow-up date, contact name and information, any referrals, and other notes.

The process of recruitment was sometimes frustrating, mainly when I lost a potential participant due to an unintentional error, for example, providing ambiguous interview instructions. Additionally, the process of recruiting participants for research by telephone requires strong communications skills. Especially when interviewing executives, corporate or political elites, which requires an additional level of planning and research (Block & Erskine, 2012; Darbi & Hall, 2014; Goldman & Swayze, 2012). As confidentiality is an ethical consideration, I did not reference my contact person thereby maintaining the anonymity of the referral.

The participants who agreed to an interview were the primary unit of analysis (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014; Poulis et al., 2013; Silverman, 2010), and they gave informed consent. The informed consent included: (a) the interviewee was informed of their rights as a research participant, (b) the participant could withdraw their consent at any time, and (c) they could refuse to answer any particular questions (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The study included participants who engaged in a trade mission to South

Africa between 1993 and 2013. The sample comprised SMEs with representatives who participated in trade missions that originated from the United States.

To ensure the participants met these criteria, I confirmed the dates of the trade missions they attended and the organization that hosted the trade mission. Additionally, I confirmed the trade mission with the coordinating agency, or through online news clippings, or other documents. I ascertained the participant's position in the company, the role they held when they participated in the trade mission, and the location of the company ensuring that it was a U. S. based company during the trade mission. With this information, age confirmation was not necessary. The exclusions included: (a) participants from other countries joining a U.S. organized trade mission, (b) spouses, and (c) partners or children not connected to a business or government agency and not seeking to conduct business during a trade mission to South Africa.

### **Ethical Research**

Ethical concerns and confidentiality were, by far, the most important issues to address in communicating with business representatives. The Walden University institutional review board (IRB) process addressed these concerns. The objective of this process was to ensure ethical research and to protect the participant's rights according to the Belmont Report protocol (Stellefson et al., 2015). Having completed the IRB process and received the approval number 01-28-14-0277006 with the expiration date of January 27, 2015, I conducted this study using procedures that confirmed informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality of the research participant. Using human subjects for research requires the observation of ethical principles of justice, beneficence, and respect

for persons (Stellefson et al., 2015). With these principles, there is a special responsibility for the researcher to inform the participant of the research process and gain their consent.

For this study, the invitees received an electronic introductory letter in which I requested a telephone conference to discuss the study. During the telephone conversation, I requested the participation of the representative that attended the trade mission. For those people who agreed to the interview, I discussed the consent and confidentiality document, which I later sent with a confirmation email. A sample informed consent form is in Appendix A. The form included: (a) that the interviewee was participating in research, (b) the purpose of the research, (c) the procedures of the research, (d) the risk and benefits of the research, (e) the voluntary nature of research participation, (f) the procedures used to protect their confidentiality, and (g) their consent included all communications between us from the point of the introductory emails. The informed consent document sent to the participant included the IRB approval number in case the participant had questions about my study or sought verification from Walden University.

Preceding the interview, the participant received an email with notice of the recording of the interview and explanation of the management of the recording. Again, at the time of the interview, I informed the participant that I was recording the interview. Before the interview commenced, I provided an explanation of the informed consent process. Additionally, I explained the voluntary nature of their participation, as there was no paid incentive for participation, and I explained their rights to withdraw at any time

without penalty. Because all of the interviews used a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) using Skype (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014), I conducted the interviews in private rooms where others could not hear the interview. I explained my policy and passion for providing anonymity and keeping the interview confidential.

On the consent form, I explicitly noted the data retention plan, which stated the plan to keep the data secure for 5 years. The participant gave their electronic consent when they responded to my email stating *I consent* or *I agree* in the subject line or the body of the email. Moreover, during the call and as I made introductory remarks, I verbally reviewed the key elements of the consent form. I requested the participant provide verbal consent and acknowledgement of understanding of their rights and their choice to participate. As a matter of ethical conduct, I worked to inform the participants of the progress of the study and to reflect their concerns throughout the research process.

The participants' identification was not critical for this study, and as the researcher, it was my responsibility to manage the confidentiality and anonymity of their name and that of their company. These standards of ethical research followed Qu and Dumay (2011), Silverman (2010) and Stellefson et al. (2015) to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants. Confidentiality relates to the protection of information supplied by research participants (Silverman, 2010). In order to protect the individuals' and their companies, I removed the information that could lead to their identification including: the company's revenues, trade sales, internal processes, their location, and the date of their trade mission event. In the study, I referred to each

participant's code number. The interview recording and transcript records had other codes assigned. All interview records are in a locked cabinet and on my password-protected computer. I will destroy the records after 5 years.

The plan for handling adverse events was (a) first to avoid harm to research participants by protecting their confidentiality, (b) initiating procedures for management of sensitive materials, and (c) to ensure the manner in which communication of the research respected the concerns of the participants (Stellefson et al., 2015). Only one adverse event occurred which caused a participant to leave the study. I followed the procedures set out in the informed consent agreement: I allowed the participant to leave the study, and I removed the participant's data from the aggregate collection of interviews. With the removal of this participant's data, analysis commenced with 22 usable interviews. The loss of the participant's data did not affect the results of the study.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Of the three strategies of inquiry, a researcher using a qualitative method is the principal data collection tool. Accordingly, interviews, documentation, and observation are common data collection strategies for qualitative research (Petty et al., 2012b). My role as the researcher for this qualitative study was to ensure the reliability of the data collection to establish the *trustworthiness* of the study (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the strategies that SME leaders require to successfully export their goods and services after a trade mission. My objective was to explore SME representatives' experiences when participating in a trade mission visit to South Africa to understand their

strategies to export successfully. The central research question addressed the statement of purpose: What strategies do SME leaders require to successfully export their goods and services after a trade mission experience? I used interpretive methodologies to present an understanding of the phenomena and address the research question.

**Interviews.** When using a qualitative method, the researcher is the principal instrument who provides the interpretation to what the participant sees, hears, and experiences. As the data collection instrument, I conducted 23 semistructured, in-depth interviews during the data collection phase of this study. I developed the questions, deductively based on the conceptual framework and the literature to address the research question. Additionally, I used a semistructured interview format using open-ended questions (Granot, Brashear, & Motta, 2012; Qu & Dumay, 2011; Rowley, 2012). Interviews are a common qualitative data collection method for encouraging participants to provide a detailed description of the phenomenon.

The semistructured interview is a managed conversation using an interview guide, comparable to the unstructured interview that flows loosely (Trier-Bieniek, 2012). The semistructured interview has elements of both the structured, with a fixed set of questions, and the unstructured that allows the interviewee to speak freely to encourage descriptive responses (Petty et al., 2012b; Qu & Dumay, 2011; Rowley, 2012). However, unlike the structured interview that follows a predetermined set of questions, the researcher using the semistructured interview uses a set of themes with which the interviewer uses as a guide (Qu & Dumay, 2011). For these reasons, it is suitable for qualitative research and is the most commonly used method (Qu & Dumay, 2011;

Rowley, 2012). The semistructured interview follows a constructionist approach whereas the researcher and participant co-construct the data (Rowley, 2012). This process allowed the participant some manner of control in the interview.

Further, I scheduled the interviews at times convenient to each participant. Moreover, I offered participants the choice between face-to-face, telephone, and Skype modalities. The option of participant choice of research methods, documented by Hanna (2012) in a study on sustainable tourism, demonstrated it was a suitable method for addressing a business problem. Hanna noted by offering an option it allowed the participant some control in the research process, and it created an equal relationship between the researcher and the participant. Consequently, as new technologies become available, Redlich-Amirav and Higginbottom (2014) suggested future participants might choose the method that best suits their requirements without affecting the quality of the research. Furthermore, Deakin and Wakefield (2014) considered the likelihood of future studies with multiple modes as a necessity for meeting ideal sampling sizes.

Of the three choices, the face-to-face interview is important for establishing trust. The face-to-face interview allows the researcher and participant to develop a social relationship, which Irvine, Drew, and Sainsbury (2012) claimed, allowed for human exchange. Many researchers claim the face-to-face interview presents the best benefits for qualitative research. In comparison, Irvine et al. (2012) found, in conducting a conversational analysis study, differences between face-to-face and telephone interviews did not hinder the quality of the information. Therefore, the difference would depend on the researcher's ability to establish rapport and trust.

Accordingly, Redlich-Amirav and Higginbottom (2014) reported telephone interviews might offer a viable alternative to face-to-face interviews without affecting the quality of the data. Trier-Bieniek (2012) found telephone interviews provided access to some hard-to-reach populations, such as working women. Having telephone interviews allowed for the benefit of scheduling because it was easier to coordinate interviews that suited the needs of the participant and the researcher. Additionally, telephone interviews provide for time efficiency and reduced costs of interviewing (Block & Erskine, 2012; Rowley, 2012).

With the benefits of cost and time savings, modern software such as Skype or VoIP is an alternative to face-to-face interviews as it provides synchronous interaction between the researcher and the participant (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hanna, 2012; Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). Expense, time, availability, practicality, and acceptability were the noted drivers of Skype as a communications medium. Face-to-face interviews present time, financial, and logistical problems. However, using remote methods was my solution to accessing hard-to-reach populations of business leaders in the United States, South Africa, and people traveling. Most of the participants in this study choose a telephone interview. Consequently, I conducted Skype to telephone line calls for most of the interviews with me initiating the call using Skype. Only one participant chose to conduct a Skype video call. Offering Skype, telephone, and face-to-face interviews as optional data collection methods led to participants that had rich stories that I might not have been able to reach due to cost, time, and other constraints.



**Pilot study.** Few studies in the literature review included a pilot study. Gil-Pechuan et al. (2013) conducted a pilot study of five textile manufacturers to test the questionnaire instrument. Poulis et al. (2013) suggested that the pilot case was a benefit in helping to contextualize the qualitative case study, particularly in sample selection. In my study, using a prepilot inquiry known as *interviewing the investigator* (Chenail, 2011; Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2012) addressed potential issues: (a) related to recruiting, (b) finding the appropriate cultural approach to participants, (c) recognizing preconceived ideas and biases, and (d) modification of interview questions. Using the interviewing the investigator method replaced the need to conduct a pilot study thus avoiding the use of hard-to-reach research participants. In conducting the interview of the investigator procedure, I acted as the interviewer and the participant to rehearse the interview. In addition, I recorded the session.

I used the trial interview to test the pieces of equipment and to address potential technical issues during the quality control event. Consequently, I understood the technical problems that could occur and had a backup plan in case of technical failures. Therefore, an equipment check procedure ensured the preparation for each interview. Following the trial interview, I made revisions to the interview guide and other communications documents before contacting study participants. The trial interview protocol demonstrated the full data collection method including the process of introducing the study and the informed consent process.

During the trial interview, I answered my questions reflecting on my experience participating in a trade mission and as the initiator and host of many trade missions. It

felt awkward; however, I thought about how the participants might feel answering the same questions. I considered the order and flow of the questions, the timing of the interview, and the appropriateness of the questions. The trial interview allowed for the recall of my experience as a business owner participating in a trade mission. I remembered those feelings of failure and loss. Inevitably, my approach to the participant was sensitive and patient, assisting them to reconstruct their memory of their particular event. Returning to the role of the investigator, recording reflective notes before and after the interview provided rigor to the process (Greene, 2014; Hunter Revell, 2013; Shannon & Hambacher, 2014). Using this note taking process, I created a journal to identify thoughts that might lead to bias. The notes showing the revisions and the transcript of the interview became part of an audit trail.

When the interview participants include corporate elites (Darbi & Hall, 2014; Goldman & Swayze, 2012), a script, as suggested by Rowley (2012) is useful for gaining access and introducing the research study (see Appendix B). Goldman and Swayze (2012) suggested a strategy that started with a letter stating the purpose of the study, and the details of participation. Appendix C contains a sample letter inviting participation to the study. Secondly, if I did not receive a response, a call to the potential participant followed within 1 to 3 weeks. For my study, the script for introducing the research study (see Appendix B) included an invitation to participate voluntarily.

**Document collection.** I collected additional data, principally from gatekeepers who provided documents such as (a) trade mission brochures, (b) forms, (c) photos, (d) news clippings, and (e) other materials sourced through Internet searches. Collecting

these documents provided corroborating evidence of the event, including correct spelling of names and organizations and contact details (Draper & Swift, 2011). Qualitative researchers can benefit from having differing data sources, such as documentation and interviews to provide confirmation of the findings (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). By triangulating the findings, researchers view the phenomenon through multiple perspectives, which demonstrates rigor and enhances credibility (Denzin, 2012; McEwen & Scheaffer, 2012; Petty et al., 2012b). The additional data were an enhancement to the study as the documents provided a visual context for the participants' stories and allowed for a more rounded description of the trade mission event.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Developing rapport with the participants during the recruitment process establishes rapport before the interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hunter Revell, 2013). Following Goldman and Swayze (2012), I developed strategies to manage resistance such as sending a professional email. Some of the participants agreed to participate after receiving the introductory email. In those cases, the first actual conversation began at the point of the interview. In some instances, the process was formal as some of the respondents agreed to receive a call to discuss the research. In other instances, some of the potential participants did not respond to the introductory email, thereby necessitating a telephone call. I anticipated the conversation with strangers required a formal, well thought out approach. With that in mind, I followed a script using a professional, but friendly tone of voice (see Appendix B). Hunter Revell (2013) indicated the first meeting was an opportunity to build trust and rapport.

Therefore, I presented a professional approach by providing specific details on the intent of the research, the time commitment required, and the basics of informed consent.

Hence, the first call established a relationship then the interview was a continuation.

**Interviews.** On the day of the interview, I used three documents that I called the interview plan that included: (a) a calendar with dates and times of the introductory call and the interview schedule, (b) an equipment list and equipment test procedure, and (c) the interview guide. The interview guide (Appendix D) is useful for conducting an in-depth, semistructured interview within 60 to 90 minutes (Silverman, 2010). The purpose of the calendar was to ensure that I made the call at the scheduled time. In developing trust with the participant, I respected their time by starting promptly and ending the interview at the scheduled time unless they agreed to go further. The second purpose of the calendar was to provide the participant their interview code name, which was the date of the interview and their series, either (a) or (b).

Time and accessibility were issues that affected my ability to conduct long, three interview series proposed by Granot, Brashear, and Motta (2012) for in-depth interviews. Most of the participants allocated an hour for the interview. A few had only 30 minutes, and some extended past 60 minutes up to 90 minutes. However, most of the participants consented to a follow-up interview if needed. I had multiple interviews with some of the participants due to scheduling conflicts or technology issues that required additional calls to complete the interview. With time as an issue, particularly in conducting telephone interviews, using an interview guide is useful for identifying selected themes, managing the flow of the conversation, and capturing all topics (Chapman et al., 2012; Granot et al.,

2012; Silverman, 2010). However, Granot et al. (2012) suggested that the researcher should use follow-up questions to probe beyond the topics listed in the interview guide. Therefore, using the interview guide for consistency, I followed the process of opening and closing the interview, and for guiding the discussion in between.

The preconceived, open-ended interview questions deductively formed from the literature review started with introductory questions. Qu and Dumay (2011) suggested these encourage detailed descriptions of the participant's experience. Hunter Revell (2013) advised flexibility in following the interview guide to allow the data to emerge from the dialog. With that consideration, based on the responses provided by the participants, I probed for additional details and to encourage dialog.

One of the disadvantages of using a telephone interview is the lack of an introductory period to develop rapport with the participant (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hunter Revell, 2013). During the telephone interviews, active listening was encouraged (Qu & Dumay, 2011; Trier-Bieniek, 2012), whereby, I was attentive to the conversation to provide adequate feedback to the participant. For example, I made encouraging remarks, and when the response was funny, I laughed with the participant. I noted the tone and language and made appropriate adjustments to match the participants' tone, as suggested by Irvine et al. (2012) to create a rapport.

An advantage of using the telephone and Skype for interviewing is the flexibility for the participant and researcher. I conducted the interviews on days and times that were convenient to my research participants. During the two months from February to April, I offered a schedule in which I provided interview times for morning, afternoon, and

evening hours, weekdays and weekend days. A Skype-to-telephone connection or Skype-to-Skype connection were the participants' choice for most of the interviews. Only one interviewee utilized the video call function during the Skype connection, and I did not record the video. These choices provide participants a decision in the interview process (Hanna, 2012; Rowley, 2011; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). I requested additional interviews with some participants to probe their responses to previous questions.

I recorded the interviews using digital audio recording in two formats. Audacity recording software version 1.3.14 beta was the primary recording device. The backup device was a digital voice memo function on an Apple iPhone 5 cellular telephone. When the interview concluded, I made a quality check of the interview recordings. The backup copy was in case of loss of data. In a few instances, there were technical problems with the Audacity recording. In those cases, the backup copy from the iPhone was merged, and a newly recorded file was made using Audacity. The new file name included the word, *merged*. The unedited backup copy remained intact.

**Data saturation.** I chose to combine interviews and documents data collection methods, and purposive and snowball sampling methods to reach data saturation. I determined that I had reached data saturation when the responses became repetitive, and there was no new information or new themes identified (Fusch & Ness, 2015; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Trotter, 2012). The interviews that occurred after Participant 20 provided similar responses comparable to the preceding interviews. For example, Participant 23 explained how the experience of arriving in South Africa felt like home. The description and recognition of this experience related to previously identified cultural and perceptual

themes. I coded this as, “it felt like home” using the participants’ repeated statements. Because I had collected richly descriptive data using the interview guide, I stopped collecting data after the interview with Participant 23, as the a priori stopping criterion was three if the initial sample estimate of 20 did not result in data saturation. Although I had previously sent out additional invitations to which those invitees never responded, I concluded the data collection as I had demonstrated data saturation.

**Transcription.** The decisions regarding transcription are critical to data collection and the findings: either naturalized or denaturalized, the use of a transcriber, the technology used, and the methodology employed (Skukauskaite, 2012).

Transcription for some researchers is a part of the interpretive process as the selection of text reflects prejudgments and decisions prior to data analysis (Strøm & Fagermoen, 2012; Tessier, 2012). Further, the transcriber brings to the process assumptions and conceptual theories that the final transcript product reflects (Skukauskaite, 2012). With these considerations in mind, the first choice made was to manage the transcription personally. The interview transcripts consisted of the discussion and responses to 11 questions addressing themes that emerged from the literature (see Appendix D).

For the first act of transcription, I used voice-recognition software to speak my interview into a text file. While listening to the interview from my iPhone voice memo application, I would repeat the interview into a microphone using the Dragon NaturallySpeaking voice recognition software. Using voice-recognition software in this manner, the researcher becomes familiar with the data early, prior to data analysis; however, the technology does not produce an accurate transcript without the researcher’s

intervention (Tessier, 2012; Woods & Fassnacht, 2012). After completing the transcription process, I proofread the transcript to identify and address errors and to insert punctuation.

Secondly, I exported the Audacity file of the same interview and downloaded the transcript from the text file into Transana speech to text software for qualitative data analysis. Transana software had benefits that I valued over some of the other commonly used CAQDAS. The most beneficial aspect was the link between the transcript and the media: audio, video, and still clips (Tessier, 2012; Woods & Fassnacht, 2012). The CAQDAS was easy to use and allowed for accessibility of the data for coding and generation of themes. For this reason, I choose Transana to work closely with the data. I would insert time codes, make corrections, and make notes that documented various analytic decisions. Time codes, which associate data with the audio, provide reference points and a chronology for the interview transcript (Woods & Fassnacht, 2012). To address issues of trustworthiness (Skukauskaite, 2012), I managed the data checking personally. I made many reviews of the recordings for comparisons with the transcripts to identify and correct mistakes such as inaccurate punctuation, mistyped, or misheard words.

Methodological notes are for the researcher to record process elements (Hunter Revell, 2013). In this manner, I recorded memos during the interpretative process of data input and transcribing the interviews to capture my thoughts about the data. Using Transana software, analytic decisions included the organization of series, episodes, collections, and keyword groups. To provide participant anonymity, I arranged the series



based on the type of the trade mission (see Table E). Interviews and their associated transcripts called an *episode* comprised the *series*. The *collections* named for keyword codes included clips of text and the associated audio or snapshots of documents. Each transcript took many hours to develop because I included language elements such as, *ah*, *ahm*, noted pauses, and interruptions. These elements had value for interpreting the story. For some, it might indicate a person who was measuring their words carefully, perhaps giving thoughtful consideration. Alternatively, it could be the person's manner of speaking, or it could indicate when the person was nervous. The methodological memos included comments about the participants, translations, keywords that might have analytical significance, and the documents.

I followed an informal practice of *pragmatic transcription*. This form of transcription included most of the stutters, overlapping speech, and silence or hesitations, along with a few Jeffersonian notations (Irvine et al., 2012; Kowal & O'Connell, 2014; Skukauskaite, 2012). My decision to transcribe in sentence format rather than include the words represented in their speech with little punctuation was to make the transcript easy for the participants to read.

**Transcript review.** Interviewee transfer review provides enhanced transparency of the research process and evidence of the ethical standards the researcher established with the IRB (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Transcript review was also referred to as the respondent validation process (Torrance, 2012). The first step of the process began with converting the text document to MS Word, software commonly used for word processing programs. While reviewing the transcripts for spelling and other errors, I formatted the

document adding page numbers, included a word key, and eliminated the time codes to reduce the technical appearance of the document. Furthermore, rather than using the participant's name, I titled the document with the participant's code name given to them during the interview.

Transferring the document to the participant allows them to validate the information (Torrance, 2012). Therefore, I sent the transcripts by email and requested they review and verify the transcript of their interview, to make comments or corrections, and return to me within a 2-week period. Additionally, by using the *track changes* feature of the MS Word software, I would have a record of the changes. The other option was to reply stating the transcript was complete. Three of the participants returned their transcripts with changes. One participant submitted a change that significantly changed a description. I engaged further with the participant who later retracted the change. Eventually, all changes were accepted and included in the final transcripts.

With interviewee transfer review, the participant is empowered to make changes and corrections to the transcript. Compared to member checking that involves sending the descriptions and themes to the interview participants to validate the researcher's descriptions (Harper & Cole, 2012; Torrance, 2012). Considering that interviewee transfer review is a process conducted prior to formal data coding, it is a data collection technique. On the contrary, member checking is performed subsequent to interpreting the data, before completion of the findings; it is a data analysis technique. For some researchers, an interviewee transfer review is more than a courtesy as the process ensures transparency (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). In this study, most of the participants returned

an email stating that the transcript was complete. One participant requested to withdraw from the study. In response, I excluded that participant's data and the associated interview notes.

### **Data Organization Technique**

As an aspect of sincerity, the researcher practices self-reflexivity by recording reflexive and methodological notes, and journaling (Greene, 2014; Hunter Revell, 2013; Strøm & Fagermoen, 2012). My transcribed notes were useful during data analysis for translating slang or metaphors, and to identify noteworthy incidences. I filed these notes in the Transana CAQDAS and in a data collection notebook. I ensured the safety and confidentiality of the electronic data by password protecting my computer and other recording devices. In addition, printed transcripts, backup copies of the interviews, and other data were stored separately from the computer in a locked file cabinet.

I assigned a code to each interview, for example, Participant A (date of interview). When there was more than one interview on a specific date, an alphabet character identified the interview series, for example, Participant B (date of interview). Also, I assigned a sequential number to the 40 documents and cataloged them into a table by (a) identifying the source, (b) date received, (c) type of document, (d) a description of the content, and (e) my comments.

Password protection on my computer and other recording devices established the confidentiality of the data. Additionally, backup copies of the interviews include paper copies and a storage device. The data management included a folder labeled with the

date of the interview. A locked cabinet will house these items for 5 years from the date of the interviews. After 5 years, I will destroy the data.

### **Data Analysis**

The focus of this study was to explore the strategies SME leaders require to successfully export their goods and services after a trade mission. I wanted to understand how the firm's structural characteristics, the firm's knowledge characteristics, and the market characteristics might relate to the firm's strategy and performance during and after the trade mission. The research question that guided this study was: What strategies do SME leaders require for successful exportation of their goods and services after a trade mission experience? In performing data analysis, I conducted thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Joffe, 2011) to address the research question using inductive and deductive coding (Joffe, 2011). I chose deductive coding to identify the themes found in the literature and conceptual framework that matched the participants' experience. Additionally, inductive methods allowed for uncovering themes not found in the literature but through the participants' experiences. With the discovery of these themes, this research might lead to new interventions for export promotion.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method for identifying patterns across a data set and finding meaning through latent and manifest themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Joffe, 2011). The thematic analysis approach has advantages of being flexible in that there are many ways of conducting it, and the process is understandable for researchers without prior theoretical background (Braun & Clarke,

2012; Garner & Ragland, 2015). Often, thematic analysis is confused with *content analysis* because the processes are similar. However, in contrast, content analysis provides the numerical and descriptive characteristics of the document's content (Sandelowski, 2000; Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Content analysis provides an objective approach to identifying the themes or codes in a data set (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). Although counting codes is a debatable practice for thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) acknowledged there are other methods for the researcher to indicate prevalence. For example, using descriptors such as: *several*, *majority*, or *most* to indicate the validity of the theme.

Although it is possible to analyze the data qualitatively and quantitatively, however with content analysis the focus is on the surface meaning of the document. Whereas the researcher might be interested in the frequency of words or coding categories, such as in a content review of articles (Andriopoulos & Slater, 2013; Gilmore et al., 2013) or to identify the quantitative descriptive characteristics of the content (Denk et al., 2012; Molina-Azorin, 2012). Consequently, when using content analysis, unless the author combines other qualitative methods to include observations and interviews the context is lost (Holsten et al., 2012; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Conversely, beyond the systematic coding and categorizing, the researcher uses thematic analysis to provide a meaning of the data in context, with a story around it (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2011). The identification of themes is by finding repeated words and phrases, and explanations using metaphors (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Therefore, a theme is determined after reviewing the corpus of data. The researcher defines a theme to relate, describe,

organize, or interpret relevant aspects of the phenomenon that is important for addressing the research question.

Thematic analysis is an analytical method for synthesizing a large volume of information by identifying themes that describe and interprets the text (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Joffe, 2011; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Thematic analysis is accessible to researchers without special training; for example, Garner and Ragland (2015) assigned a graduate study activity for students to conduct a thematic analysis of published articles in organizational communications. The researcher using thematic analysis develops skills such as pattern identification and coding that are useful for other qualitative approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Joffe, 2011). Braun and Clarke (2012) offered a six-phase approach of conducting a thematic analysis.

During the analytical process, I followed the six phases as presented by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). In phase 1, the analytic process involved multiple reviews of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). Using Transana analytical software, I listened to the interview recordings while reading the transcripts, making corrections and reflective notes. After transcription of the interview data, I followed the same recursive process of reading the documents, making comments and reflective notes. I searched through the data for patterns and to identify themes. Concurrently throughout phase 1, I constructed preliminary data-driven codes. I followed Joffe (2011) for developing a coding process.

In phase 2, I began open coding by assuming a questioning, reflective attitude (Finlay, 2014; Hunter Revell, 2013; Silverman, 2010). I asked self-reflective questions to reveal keywords or phrases that provided meaningful codes (Joffe, 2011). In phase 3, I

coded and grouped the data according to patterns identified by words and phrases that repeated by several participants, and metaphors used as verbal shorthand for a common experience. I used words and ideas the participants stated to give names to chunks of the recorded data called *clips*, in Transana terminology and copied them to *collections* identified by themes associated with keywords.

In using a hybrid approach, a scan of the literature prior to coding identified deductive codes (Joffe, 2011). I identified keywords and codes that corresponded to the literature and conceptual framework then developed a codebook by labeling and defining these keyword groups (Joffe, 2011). Subsequently, I looked for themes, patterns, and dominant topics based on the selection of inductive and deductive theoretical codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Joffe, 2011). The initial counts of keywords and code groups were 22 keywords with a total of 121 code words or phrases. As in content analysis, at the manifest level, I counted the frequency of the keyword codes. I created frequency tables to understand the data, which led to the identification of potential themes.

As I analyzed the data in phase 4, I followed Silverman's (2010) suggestion to reflect on questions that focus on the method, themes, previous literature, and conceptual framework. Through reflective thinking, I ensured the accurate interpretation of the concerns of the participants. I proceeded to higher level, latent coding by making connections between codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). I looked for similarities and differences between the codes, adding new ones and deleting some codes as the definitions expanded. Additionally, attendant with my reflections on

the meaning of the data, I compared my comments of the various interviews, I created methodological notes, and associated them with audio and transcript clips.

This recursive process led to developing themes that encapsulated the key concerns of the participants. A final review of the themes included comparing each theme to the keyword codes and collections of clips (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Joffe, 2011). I reviewed the data table listing the trade mission documents to determine the applicability of the themes to the entire corpus of data. I constructed an overview table identifying themes, subthemes, and exemplars in a similar manner to Clarke et al. (2013) and Peiris et al. (2012). In phase 5, I combined some themes and renamed some themes based on the participants' terms. The analytical results reflected inductive and deductive elements of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Joffe, 2011). I listed these analytical results in a table format. For interpretive validity, I emailed the table to the participants for validation. Most of the participants responded indicating their agreement or disagreement along with additional comments.

The participants confirmed these themes and subthemes with 13 of the 22 interview participants responding. With these responses, I combined the subthemes that had more than a majority agreement. I changed some of the subthemes to major themes as the responses and comments indicated their importance. Initially, the theme table included eight themes. However, the theme *Stages of the trade mission* received almost unanimous agreement with one disagreement made for the subtheme, *Stage 4: Appreciation*. From these results, I determined to remove Stages of the trade mission from the list of themes. The five *Stages* were clearly a description of the trade mission



process and the other themes corresponded to the five stages. With this thematic shift, I moved to phase 6 in organizing the themes, developing figures to depict the results, and writing a report on the findings.

In presenting the findings through summary tables, I presented the themes and the subtheme exemplars by indicating the participants' agreement that the theme described their experience. Following established conventions in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I employed phrases such as *majority of the participants*, *many participants*, *some*, or *few participants*, reflecting prevalence without indicating frequency counts.

### **Literature and Conceptual Framework**

The theory of the resource-based view (RBT) of the firm identifies resources as the firm's assets, which combined strategically, create unique firm capabilities (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). As a theory that explains the firm's competitive actions through resource manipulations, in the multinational context, the RBT has application in the international business domain. The intent for the RBT conceptual framework in this study was to explain how the participant, as a member of the trade mission delegation, uses and borrows resources to create a competitive advantage.

The first review of the literature early in the phase of this study revealed the questions listed on the interview guide in Appendix D. As the study developed and with increasing engagement with the literature and conceptual framework, the focus of the study became more apparent, in the manner that Sinkovics and Alfoldi (2012) presented the progressive focusing argument. The interview topic guide was relevant for the

interview discussions as I reconstructed the participants' understanding of the event, their business needs, and their expectations of the trade mission event. Through the interview process, I invited the business representatives to articulate their understanding and interest in exploiting the resources of a trade mission.

During the highly reflexive write-up phase, I understood the relevance of strategic resources to the RBT, particularly how the trade mission participants used dynamic capabilities, entrepreneurship, internationalization knowledge, and marketing capabilities in the external environment. The analysis of the participants' responses provided an understanding of how the literature and the RBT explained their trade mission experience and answered the research question.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Assumptions of reliability and validity from the qualitative perspective require that the research instruments measure the phenomenon accurately (Silverman, 2010). Reliability refers to consistency and the ability to replicate the study with consistent results. Validity refers to the truth; meaning the phenomenon represents the true situation the study references (Silverman, 2010). For the interpretive researcher, producing a rich descriptive narrative in a natural setting with credible and justifiable results confirms the quality of the research (Scotland, 2012). Contrasted to postpositivism, in which the researcher identifies the reliability and validity of the study through internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Scotland, 2012), the qualitative researcher addresses different objectives. Silverman (2010) explained the qualitative researcher presents the

procedures and methods to demonstrate a methodological awareness, presenting the reliability of the methods thus confirming the validity of the findings.

The criteria for trustworthiness for evaluating interpretive research proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) include: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. Thomas and Magilvy (2011) elaborated further that rigor, the application of thoroughness, is the means for establishing the trustworthiness and confidence of the findings of qualitative research. Similarly, with this study, the data collection and analytical methods assured rigor and fulfilled the requirements for demonstrating trustworthiness.

### **Reliability**

Transferability refers to the in-depth description of the study population that another researcher can use to replicate the study (Silverman, 2010). Identification of the boundaries of the study refers to the study population (Poulis et al., 2013; Silverman, 2010; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The study participants included business representatives who participated in any trade mission to South Africa between 1993 and 2013 that originated from the United States. Identifying gatekeepers purposively drawn from my network led to obtaining initial participants. I found more participants through a snowball sampling process.

Control of the observer's bias through reflexivity is a critical part of the data collection process (Greene, 2014; Hunter Revell, 2013). Accordingly, my interview protocol included a pilot interview procedure before conducting the interviews with participants (Chenail, 2011; Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2012). The trial interview allowed

for reflexivity before interviewing participants. Methodological and interview notes demonstrate the researcher's reflexive process (Greene, 2014; Hunter Revell, 2013). Therefore, using these notes, I managed the transcription of the interviews using several reviews of the interview recordings and made additional analytic notes as I completed transcription and coding.

**Data saturation.** Understanding that data saturation reflects on the validity of the results (Fusch & Ness, 2015), I collected data until I fulfilled the requirement of data saturation (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Rapley, 2012; Trotter, 2012); whereby, the responses became repetitive, and there was no new information or new themes. For the purposes of demonstrating reliability, documents for data collection and data analysis provided a trail of evidence for this study. The interview transcripts, methodological notes, data analysis documents, and reflexive notes present the decisions made throughout the data collection process (Greene, 2014; Hunter Revell, 2013; Shannon & Hambacher, 2014; Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). Consequently, these processes allow for the confirmability of the study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). An audit trail of all records demonstrates the dependability of the research process by presenting the process used to reach the research findings (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Through transparency of documentation and a formal process, the results of the study are transferable.

### **Validity**

I followed standards of rigor for demonstrating integrity and competence within the study. Thomas and Magilvy (2011) stated *rigor* is having trust in the research

findings as applied to theoretical consistency. The application of the RBT to the interpretation of the participants' meanings, inductive and deductive thematic analysis, and participants' verbatim quotations, strengthen the credibility of this study. In addition, a member checking process ensured these themes conveyed the meaning the participants attributed to their events and assured descriptive validity.

**Transcript review and member checking.** Transcript review is a process to ensure credibility and assures the validity of the transcript (Skukauskaite, 2012). Allowing the participant members to check the themes found through the data analysis process is an important aspect of ensuring rich rigor and credibility (Torrance, 2012). Additionally, member checking occurs through sharing the themes with the participants for review and comment (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011; Torrance, 2012). I shared my preliminary findings with the participants during the data analysis process by requesting their input on the themes. Their responses validated the confirmability of the findings, particularly through their involvement in analyzing and co-constructing the final selection of themes. Thematic tables and notes were part of the auditable documents to verify the findings.

**Triangulation.** As an alternative validation strategy, triangulation provides a means for comparisons and contrasts as an essential element to the outcomes of the study (Denzin, 2012; Torrance, 2012). Referring to a *prism* or *crystallization*, Denzin (2012) suggested that multiple qualitative processes are useful for revealing the phenomenon from different angles; they make for a richer result and increase the assurance of validity. Hence, Denzin identified *methodological triangulation* as one of the four types of

triangulation. As a within method approach, as opposed to an across method approach, it involves multiple qualitative methods (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; McEwen & Scheaffer, 2012; Torrance, 2012). Validity is confirmed when the findings from analyzing data from the various methods results in similar conclusions (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Further, Denzin noted using multiple methods strengthens the rigor of the study and adds depth to the findings. In this study, triangulation of methods included in-depth interviews, document analysis along with interview notes to add to the confirmability of this study.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 2, I presented the purpose of the study and a research plan to explain the research method and research design. Using a qualitative descriptive approach for this study included 22 semistructured, in-depth interviews with representatives who participated in a trade mission to South Africa, and document analysis. The purpose was to explore the strategies that SME leaders require to successfully export their goods and services after a trade mission. The unit of analysis was the U.S. SME trade mission firm; the representative described their experiences in participating in a trade mission event through in-depth, semistructured interviews. Additionally, the document analysis process ensured data saturation and content validity. The research plan included a prepilot study, purposive and snowball sampling, and a process for accessing the participants. I adhered to ethical principles by explaining the voluntary nature of participation and obtaining the participant's informed consent. The data collection and data analysis plan addressed the process to transcribe and code the data using Transana CAQDAS. During the thematic

analysis process, I presented the themes to the participants for member checking. Finally, the reliability and validity of the study related to the data collection and analysis methods confirmed the conceptual validity. Section 3 includes the results of the study, the findings addressing the research question, and the conclusion with recommendations to address the business problem.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the strategies that SME leaders require to successfully export their goods and services after a trade mission. The general business problem was that trade mission participation does not always lead to profitable results in new contracts for future exports. The specific business problem was that some U.S. SME leaders lack strategies for successful exportation of their goods and services after a trade mission. Therefore, the principle research question that guided this study was: What strategies do SME leaders require for successful exportation of their goods and services after a trade mission experience?

This section includes the results of the research in relation to the research question and the conceptual framework, the theory of the resource-based view (RBT). I used the RBT to explain how the trade mission participant, as a member of the delegation, used internal and borrowed external resources for their competitive advantage. This section contains: (a) findings representing the results of analysis, (b) applications for professional practice, (c) implications for social change, (d) recommendations for action, (e) recommendations for further study, and (f) my reflections on the research process. The participants in this qualitative descriptive study were small and medium enterprise (SME) representatives who attended a trade mission to an emerging market economy (EME), specifically to South Africa between 1993 and 2013. I protected the confidentiality of the participant with sequential codes from one to 23. The participant number, for example, P1 was the first participant interviewed. Appendix E provides demographic information



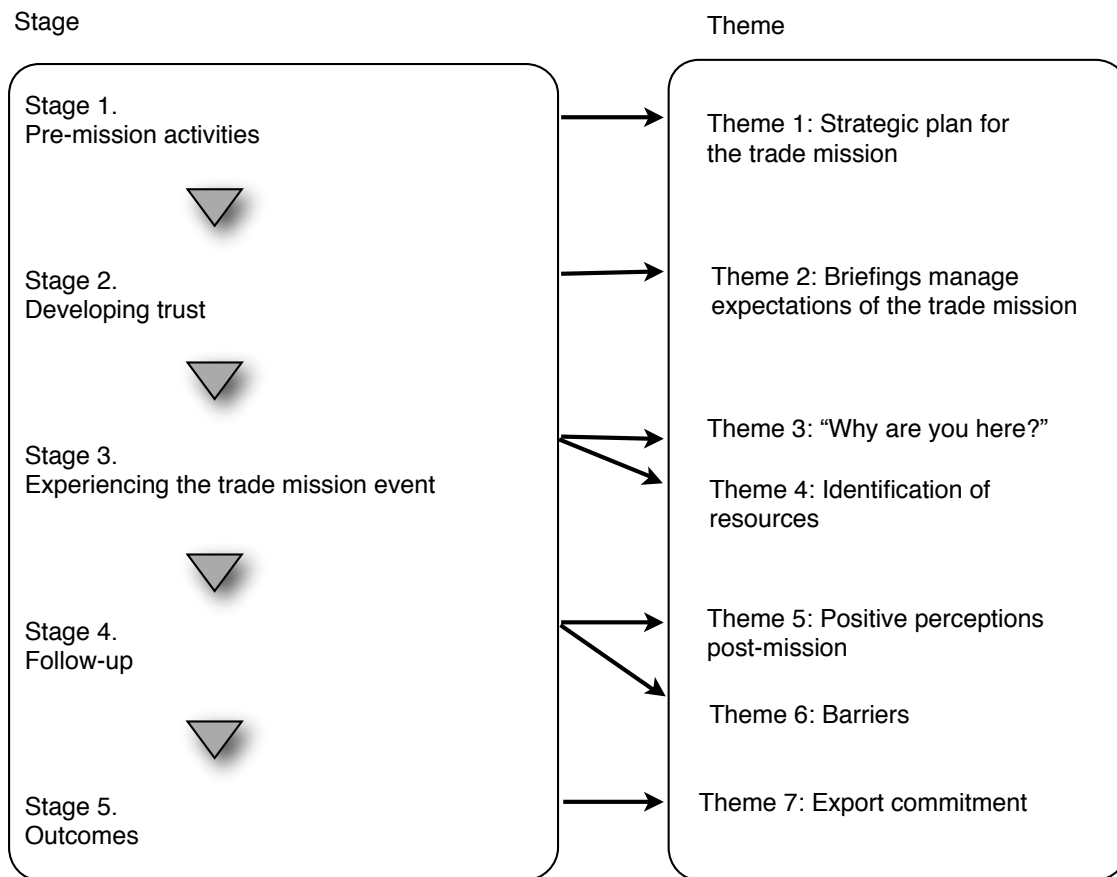
related to the 23 interviews, noting the discontinued one. These participant demographics identify the interview method, and the type of trade mission event, which corresponds to the participant number.

A five-stage process captured the description of the trade mission event. A member checking process ensured descriptive validity. Seven themes reflected the participants' experiences and strategies for successful export performance after a trade mission. The seven validated themes were: (a) strategic planning, (b) briefings manage expectations, (c) they want to know why you are here, (d) identification of resources, (e) positive perceptions lead to positive outcomes, (f) identification of barriers, and (g) export commitment. The findings in composite include results addressing the research question, the conceptual framework, and the literature.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

#### **Findings That Address the Research Question**

**Stages of the trade mission participation process.** I used an analytic approach of examining interview and document data for themes to determine that the trade mission process was similar for all of the participants. First, the trade mission experience occurred through stages (see Figure 1). Second, these stages represent a description of the participants' experiences as they relate to the process of participating in a trade mission. Third, the participant verified themes relate to the stages, and the seven themes align with the five sequential stages to describe the trade mission and express the thematic concept. Although each trade mission was unique, the process was similar.



*Figure 1.* The stages of the trade mission participation process and related themes. The common experience of the trade mission participant progresses through stages. The participants reviewed keywords to identify and confirm related themes.

**Stage 1: Pre-mission activities.** Several months prior, the EDO would announce the trade mission dates. Stage 1 encompasses the activities that occurred preceding the trade mission. During their interviews, the study participants related their thought process and their knowledge gathering before traveling to South Africa.

The corresponding theme 1 was *Strategic planning* for the trade mission. A majority of the participants attended a seminar or conference call, participated in a briefing, conducted desktop research, or reviewed the research provided by the

organizers. Many of the participants had spoken with local contacts such as the EDO or their South African contacts. Based on this information, the participant determined the purpose of the trip was for: (a) sales, (b) exploration, (c) a cultural experience, or (d) some combination. However, some participants were more curious about the country than on business development. Some delegates participated for a cultural experience and to support the group leader. Such participants provided the backdrop for the leader in being a supportive audience. Most participants agreed the visit was a learning experience. Through a member checking process participants provided responses that led to the construction of Theme 1, *Strategic planning* (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Participant Verification of Theme 1: Strategic Planning*

Subtheme Exemplar	Participant Agreement
It was an exploratory “look-see” type trip	Most
I was looking to make sales	Some
It was a learning experience	Most

In stating their objectives for the trade mission, many participants used the term, *a look-see type trip*, which meant they were looking for information rather than sales.

Their expectations of making a sales deal were less important than acquiring the necessary market knowledge; therefore, as P10 stated, the purpose was for market exploration.

I was mainly operating in a look-see kind of mode. I was there to see. [I said] okay now, you go to South Africa just on the basis of what you heard, and had

read and now is your chance to go there and see. . . . Rather than, one, wherein, had I been able to do it again . . . I would have spent more time conducting my own research to drill down and actually have identified some prospective companies that I thought would make sense to me to establish contact with.

One participant noted they required to know the “essential information on the country,” particularly for the first country visit or as a first-time trade mission participant. The essential information would include social and cultural, in addition to economic data. For the first country visit, such comprehensive information would provide a holistic picture of the country and address their strategic objectives. Some business delegates required the briefing information to address the question of, *Could I live here?* Consequently, for those participants who termed it a look-see type trip, they required more information than the organizer initially provided. Therefore, the experiential exposure of the trade mission was necessary for their planning process. Hilmersson (2014b) noted experiential learning is fundamental for businesses to move through the internationalization process to successful export performance.

**Stage 2: Developing trust.** Many of the study participants’ responses referenced *trust*. Therefore, several of the keyword codes included the words *trust*, *credibility*, or the phrase, *an issue of trust*. In the early stages of the trade mission process there is a high need for trust between the participant, organizers, and potential business partners.

Along with experiential learning, building trust and developing commitment to the market and partners are essential for relationship building for the internationalizing firm (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Although the interview prompts did not include

questions about trust and the topic was not explicit, evidently, the participants trusted the organizers. The participant's trust was implicit, as the delegates determined to travel to a foreign country with a delegation of unconnected people. The implications were: (a) the U.S. trade mission participant trusted the organizers and the governmental information they provided, (b) the participants were safe in a high-risk environment, and (c) the participants trusted the vetting process: that the organizers carefully choose the transportation, hotels, contractors, and matchmaking participants.

There was a distrust-trust continuum with some participants having complete trust of the organizers and leaders on the one end, and others who were apprehensive on the other end of the spectrum. A few participants were openly distrustful of the trade mission leader and did not see beyond the overt activities to understand the diplomacy as it was occurring. For some participants, this was a hostile environment where the leader provided no value to their business purpose. For P8, the leaders played a ceremonial role, and their agenda had no relevance for the delegates. The lack of trust affected their perception of the entire trade mission process.

The corresponding theme 2 was *Briefings manage expectations of the trade mission*. Participants' responses led to the construction of Theme 2 (see Table 2). Although only a few participants felt thoroughly briefed, many felt that the briefings did not adequately prepare them and they were not prepared to know what to expect. Other than the information provided by the EDO, some participants conducted limited research; however, their participation goals were to gather information and possibly develop new business. One participant stated, "I went in with my eyes wide open." They had no

preconceptions of the manners in which to conduct business; therefore, they were trusting in the ordinary process of meeting people and engaging ideas. Some of the participants had misconceptions of how to conduct business in the country. For example, P3 acknowledged assumptions made about the business environment due to previous experiences in similar environments.

I have been to a couple of African countries. South Africa was starkly different than the countries in West Africa that I had visited, so that was completely eye opening for me. . . . I tried not to have any assumptions about South Africa, and you know, what I saw in pictures, but it didn't feel like Africa.

Table 2

*Participant Verification of Theme 2: Briefings Manage Expectations*

Subtheme Exemplar	Participant Agreement
Went in with my eyes wide open	Most
Expected the organizers to manage all aspects of TM	Some
The group leader's credibility would open doors	Most

Most participants expected the group leader's credibility would create access by *opening doors* for them with government officials and industry players, and, therefore, would provide favorable outcomes. Only a few participants expected the organizers to manage all aspects of the trade mission including the matchmaking and follow-up activities, such as P23 expected a managed event. Participant 23 stated when "the organizers manage the details it frees [the participant] up to be creative." Having

complete trust, some participants had expectations that were beyond the roles of the organizers and leaders.

Other participants articulated their business purpose for being there and ensured the organizers understood their plans. These participants engaged with the organizers throughout the process. They recognized that having prior knowledge of the market would better prepare them to address barriers to accessing the market; consequently, they attended briefings and conducted research. They developed a trusting relationship with the organizers and the potential business partners. The statement from P20 suggested the briefings were adequate, and the participant developed a trusting relationship with the organizer: “I had a clear understanding of the business environment . . . [The organizer] did a phenomenal job of who my match-ups were going to be. . . . I didn't expect that volume [of meetings], but it was nice.”

**Stage 3: Experiencing the trade mission event.** The participants explained their understanding and expectations of the trade mission event and related specific business goals. Many of the participants described their experience as a member of a U.S. trade delegation in rich, vivid language, using phrases such as, “very *festivus*” to explain their experience.

The participant’s objective of attending the event presented in Stage 1 was: Sales, market exploration, having a cultural experience, or some combination of needs. Consequent to experiencing the local culture the participants gained an understanding of the business culture. The statement from P16 on a changed cultural preconception from

another African visit described the paradigm shift that many of the participants mentioned:

As you know that Dakar is a Francophone [country]. . . . So when I got off the airplane and I said, “Hey how you doing, Bra?” He spoke to me in French. . . . And this Bra' said, “Bonjour.” I had taken French in college, and I said, “Oh, it's like that.”

Participants provided responses that led to the construction of Theme 3, *They want to know why you are here* (see Table 3). Many participants were skeptical about the country and the business environment preceding their arrival; therefore, an ongoing evaluation of the market occurred throughout the trade mission. Concerns of business readiness or hostility following the removal of U.S. legislated sanctions might have been the cause of skepticism. Participant 14's experience was an exemplar for its dissimilarity from the other participant's positive response to the South African business environment:

I kept being asked the question, “Why are you here?” And I kept thinking, when you hear it over, and over, and over again, I would say, “Well isn't it obvious?” . . . I kept thinking that there was some trade secret that they thought that I was going to take or I was going to be their new competitor in the marketplace.



Table 3

*Participant Verification of Theme 3: They Want to Know Why You Are Here*

Subtheme Exemplar	Participant Agreement
Curiosity about South Africa's business readiness	Most
Used the trade mission to link to cultural heritage	Some
To understand South Africa's competitiveness—were they fearful of competition?	Few

Participants were asked by organizers and matchmaking partners the question, *Why are you here?* This question, in various forms, was listed on some of the trade mission applications, which suggests participants should develop a clear statement of purpose during the planning stage for the organizers to ensure appropriate meetings. However, for some of the participants: (a) their matches were not appropriate, (b) they misunderstood the market and changed course during the trade mission, or (c) they had few prescheduled meetings before the trade mission began. Other participant experiences identified limited industry or market knowledge that would enable them to understand the market structure, the primary actors, and ways of reducing the *liability of foreignness*.

In contrast to P14, many of the participants did not agree that South Africans were protectionists or fearful of competition. There were several references of South Africans' readiness and eagerness to engage with American delegations. Participant 9 stated, "in South Africa there was a hunger, there was an eagerness, they wanted to do business, they wanted to connect, they wanted to discuss, explore, engage in conversation, and they were very keen. It was very apparent." However, all of the participants expected their success would require a long engagement with the country. They would require multiple

visits to develop networks and understand the changing nature of the country in the midst of a radical transition to becoming a democracy.

Another theme associated with stage 3 was *Identification of resources*, theme 4. Resource planning is critical for internationalizing firms for the identification of strategic alternatives to address changes in a dynamic environment (Tolstoy, 2012). High-level, strategic planning to identify the resources available to the firm can enhance their ability to actively pursue opportunities when entering the market. Further, the firm's strategic planning would provide managers the information to address uncertainty (Hilmersson & Jansson, 2012; Parnell et al., 2012). Table 4 presents some of the resources identified including the participants' relationship with the organizers, travel briefings, networks, cultural heritage, and experience in Africa.

Table 4

*Participant Verification of Theme 4: Identification of Resources*

Subtheme Exemplar	Participant Agreement
Helpfulness of the organizers and leaders	Most
A final report or a de-briefing would have made a difference in follow-up	Most
Identification of resources were clear before or during the trade mission	Some
Shared cultural heritage was a resource	Some

Although a majority agreed that a shared cultural heritage was a resource, a few disagreed of its resourcefulness, and one participant stated, "I know you mean being African American. But my shared resource was having so much African experience." This statement echoed P12's concept of a kinship in experience. Kinship was an

important concept as participants were creative in identifying business resources and searching for opportunities to establish rapport. Therefore, some relied on their cultural heritage and others drew on a shared professional or industry culture. One participant articulated the experience of being disadvantaged, as regards to economic status, as an experience shared between African Americans and black South Africans. The participant suggested the similarity of the experiences was something from which they could build a dialog. Participants identified other resources to include: (a) international experience, (b) management commitment, (c) industry experience, (d) product knowledge, and (e) the U.S. Embassy South Africa team.

**Stage 4: Follow-up.** Participants addressed their plans after the trade mission event as follow up activities. Follow-up activities suggest that the participant seeks to pursue business beyond the initial contact. Some of the keyword phrases included “did not follow-up” or “made return visit.”

The corresponding theme 5 was: *Positive perceptions leads to positive outcomes* (see Table 5). Shamsuddoha et al. (2009) indicated a manager’s perception of the export environment leads to export commitment. Thus, having a positive perception of the country and developing relationships motivated the participant to conduct follow-up activities. Experiential knowledge facilitates a reduction in psychic distance (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Having a short psychic distance facilitates the individual’s ability to establish and develop relationships in foreign markets. Hence, following the trade mission, when the participant perceived an economic benefit, they responded by sending emails, placing calls, utilized social media, and when necessary, made return visits.

Table 5

*Participant Verification of Theme 5: Positive Perceptions Leads to Positive Outcomes*

Subtheme Exemplar	Participant Agreement
Saw a visible <i>economic culture</i> in their desire to do business	Most
It felt like home	Most
Changed ideas of South Africa being an impoverished African country	Some

The South African peoples' eagerness to do business created a positive impression on the participants. Many participants spoke explicitly or alluded to *experiencing culture shock* due to having had an enormously different impression of the *place* and the people. Participant 17 excitedly remarked on experiencing the vibrant business culture, "if you have to speak to the economic culture, you saw that there was this infrastructure . . . wherever you'd go you meet an African who wanted to start some kind of a business venture." In defining this characteristic, most of the participants agreed they saw a visible *economic culture* in [South Africans'] desire to do business. Coyne and Williamson (2012) recognized that countries with open trade policies support an entrepreneurial environment, which was reflective of South Africa's government promotion of trade with U. S. businesses and openness to hosting trade delegations. Consequently, the economic culture (Coyne & Williamson, 2012) was apparent in the people's attitudes, the host organizations, and government's acceptance.

The participants who made similar observations were speaking primarily of black South Africans. Their perceptions before the trade mission were uncertain. They perceived black South Africans as economically disadvantaged and would not have the

same eagerness to conduct business as South Africans from other ethnic groups. However, conversely, during their visits the participants had positively different impressions of the South African people and heightened by their impressions of the physical infrastructure in the country. These positive perceptions would benefit the participants through a decreased psychic distance thus making market entry easier (Albaum, 2012; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). However, some of the participants used the concept of experiencing *culture shock*, related to receiving new information that presented a different perspective. They spoke excitedly about this experience indicating a positive acceptance of the new, although contradictory information.

Many of the participants felt comfortable in the South African environment and agreed with the statement “it felt like home.” The perception of the place feeling like home was necessary for the participants to feel comfortable in meeting people and establishing trust with potential partners. Their transportation was in similar vehicles used at home in the United States, the paved roads had English signs, and the hotels were similar with familiar brand names. Although some of the differences were visible, the similarities allowed the participants to feel they could navigate the business environment. Many of the participants agreed they had changed misconceptions after their visit to the country. One participant stated they “knew the range of people were both rich and impoverished.” Hence, South Africa felt like home because the environment felt familiar.

The other theme relating to stage 4 was *Identification of barriers*, Theme 6. The topic of barriers was sensitive. Often, the interview prompt required further explanation

to define potential barriers such as tariffs, duties, and nontariff impediments. Most of the participants did not discuss their perception of barriers either preceding or subsequent to their trade mission. These responses led to the construction of Theme 6 (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Participant Verification of Theme 6: Identification of Barriers*

Subtheme Exemplar	Participant Agreement
Some barriers could not be overcome	Some
Barriers made it difficult to do business	Some
I could not compete against other countries	Few
The organizers or leaders were not helpful	Few

Many of the responses indicated the barriers they experienced made conducting business difficult. Although most of the responses indicated the participants felt competitive against other countries, only a few agreed they were not competitive. One participant stated in a written response, “government sponsored trade missions must have greater support in the area of opening doors, introductions, policy development, barrier elimination and doing business.” In general, the government-sponsored trade missions provided support in addressing barriers as indicated by the participants who believed the organizers and leaders were helpful.

**Stage 5: Outcomes.** Outcomes refer to strategic and financial goals. Some participants discussed strategic goals in establishing business or a strategic alliance. The keyword phrase “an alliance could benefit” was across the dataset.

When questioned about export performance, many of the participants indicated their disappointment through somber tones, and their disappointment was even more apparent when they discussed follow-up activities. They may have had good intentions during their time in the country, in spite of this, the good intentions diminished when they returned home to their busy lives. Results occurred along several paths: (a) they made a return trip, (b) they made a sale, (c) they established an alliance, or (d) they gave up on the project.

Participants' responses included in Table 7 led to the construction of Theme 7, *Export commitment*. They were the outcomes interviewees indicated after participating in the trade mission and their following actions. In the context of export performance, export commitment, gleaned from the literature, indicates management's commitment of resources to ensure successful export outcomes (Navarro-García et al., 2015).

Table 7

*Participant Verification of Theme 7: Export Commitment*

Subtheme Exemplar	Participant Agreement
Successful exporting requires long-term engagement and multiple visits	Majority
Follow-up activities created trust with potential business partner	Some
I used the organizers for follow-up	Some

The participants exhibited export commitment through ongoing planning, budgeting, follow-up activities, and multiple return visits to South Africa. An export commitment was not relevant for those participants who had determined the market did not meet their criteria, or the timing was not appropriate. For these reasons, the project

was no longer feasible, and the participant did not pursue it further. These trade missions also included participants who were fully committed to the market or to exporting and their long-term goal was to export. These participants expected positive results would occur over time and suggested their expectations were realistic.

The trade mission was a visual experience. In that the participants expressed their need to have a “look-see”, and it “opened up my eyes”, or during the visit they had “eyes wide open” for business opportunities. During this experience, the SME leaders determined whether their understanding of the market was congruent with the reality. Through interactions with potential partners, local people, places, and events, the participants determined if the market had potential or lacked the potential to meet their business goals. Most of the participants agreed that the purpose of the visit was exploratory. They needed to explore (a) the trade mission experience, (b) the country, (c) the process of exporting, and (d) international business development. The selection of SMEs to participate in trade missions fulfilled various government objectives including exposing the business leaders to the internationalization process. Not all participants commit to internationalize; however, these participants believed the learning experience provided valuable information that might prove useful for future business development.

### **Findings Related to the Conceptual Framework**

Resource-based perspectives address the firm, the external competitive environment, and the firm’s use of resources. Barney (1991) identified the four characteristics of resources for gaining sustainable competitive advantage as (a) valuable, (b) rare, (c) inability to imitate, and (d) nonsubstitutability (VRIN). In the findings of this



qualitative study, I considered the U.S. trade mission participant's use of internal and external resources for market entry, increased exports, and to create a sustainable competitive advantage. For this study, the internal resources included the participants' knowledge resources and management characteristics. When the firm enters the market with a strategic plan, the company's management can minimize the effects of barriers and other environmental constraints.

The external resources included the group leader, the organizer, the U.S. Embassy team, the State's export promotion tools, State-funded overseas offices, and other network resources. The borrowed resources for the participant included the credibility of the governor, the state brand such as *Team Florida*, or the National *Made in the USA* brand, or the brand of a recognized institutional asset such as the *National Minority Supplier Development Council*. Other resources available to US trade mission participants might include access to the US Foreign Commercial Service or a state-funded overseas office, and other resources the state EDOs provide to the participant to make them more competitive (McMillan, 2012). The trade mission participant combines these resources to create a competitive advantage, particularly for accessing a new market such as an emerging market.

**The firm.** Using resources that meet the characteristics of *VRIN*, (Barney, 1991) can counteract the firm's structural deficiencies, unknown environmental risks, and other competitive factors such as weak institutions and nontariff barriers to trade. The participants identified (a) company name, (b) reputation, (c) product name, (d) product quality, and (e) product price as some of their internal resources. A firm that has

minimum company or brand recognition must employ the benefit of external institutional resources to create a competitive advantage. Whereas, the DOC readily invests the financial costs of communicating and maintaining their message about the country brand, the small firm cannot afford these costs for its own brand. Identifying with these institutional resources, the trade mission participant might extend the positive brand perception to their company. Consequently, they benefit from the known attributes and customer favorability associated with the country brand or the mission organizer with a recognizable brand such as the state's overseas office.

Other VRIN or organizational resources might include what P12 termed a *cultural kinship* or a relationship based on shared experiences. However, resources do not always display the same VRIN characteristics in some international contexts. For example, the cultural kinship advantage the African-American found in South Africa was not apparent when the same participant attended trade missions to Europe. In that case, the firm employed multiple resources such as institutional capital to sustain its competitive advantage. For that participant, the resources included the mission organizers and leaders, the host country team, the Embassy staff, or a state's foreign office. These participants used the trade mission as a strategic means of entering foreign markets. Further, Leonidou et al. (2011) noted firms use resources and capabilities in combinations to create value offerings specific for the foreign market.

**The firm's use of resources.** Some participants recognized their organizers could assist in creating a price advantage. For some participants, their cost management and differentiation was strategic. They built the sales volume over time to develop an

international brand, and they considered the EDO as a strategic partner. Initially, in the first step of market entry, these participants benefited from the services the EDO provided: shared logistical services and accessing information about potential buyers. Using these services before the first meeting allowed participants to prepare a focused presentation. In that regard, P3 found having a pricing strategy prior to the trade mission was critical for successful results. For some of the participants, trade missions were foundational for their international marketing strategy. Consequent to their arrival in the country, the participants could offer a credible presentation of the product quality. Their physical presence of being there made a difference. Although many of the SMEs were very small and not internationally known, their representatives used the trade mission event for creating access to the market and introductions to key actors. The participants gained access to the market through the trade mission and had introductions to the right players. Other participants suggested being in an American delegation had the concomitant differentiating effect of providing a perception of having high-quality products.

**The external environment.** Participants used external resources to understand and overcome barriers in the foreign environment. Limitations, unexpected costs, and new information constituted the theme: *barriers*. These constraints identified as *uncertainties* and other issues that the participants were not able to resolve on their own, therefore, they sought relief through external resources such as networks or alliance partners. Thus, faced with high risks in the South African competitive environment, the firm would determine whether to enter the market through an international alliance or

other market entry modes (Brouthers, 2013; Holtbrügge & Baron, 2013). However, some of the trade mission participants did not have adequate market knowledge to make decisions on market entry or to evaluate business prospects. Although the trade missions to South Africa provided market-specific, experiential knowledge during the event, internationalization knowledge and market knowledge preceding the trade mission would have reduced the uncertainties participants identified as barriers. In that regard, as Parnell et al. (2012) found some SMEs perform poorly because of misperceptions of the market.

Accordingly, alliances benefit SMEs with market information, additional resources, and they can reduce psychic distance. Establishing an alliance is a long-term process, noted one participant. It requires a commitment to the market, which necessitates extensive market research to determine that the market has long-term potential, and for the identification of barriers and risks. With this understanding, to create the competitive advantage, the firm would use intangible resources and employ exploratory and exploitative capabilities (Cui et al., 2014) that benefit the firm through product development and market development activities.

Some participants saw an alliance as important to their business. Therefore, they conducted extensive research before and after the trade mission to build upon their market knowledge. For example, some participants used their networks to identify market entry opportunities before the trade mission. One participant realized that their business could develop “a global footprint” by using network resources and developing alliances. Another participant concluded that a local partner was integral to the

company's successful investment in the market. P20 stated, "having a local partner improves the success of any project regardless . . . Because a joint venture, we're in it together to make sure that it is a long-term successful process." These strategies for building networks before the trade mission helped to mitigate the problems for market entry and reduced the liability of foreignness.

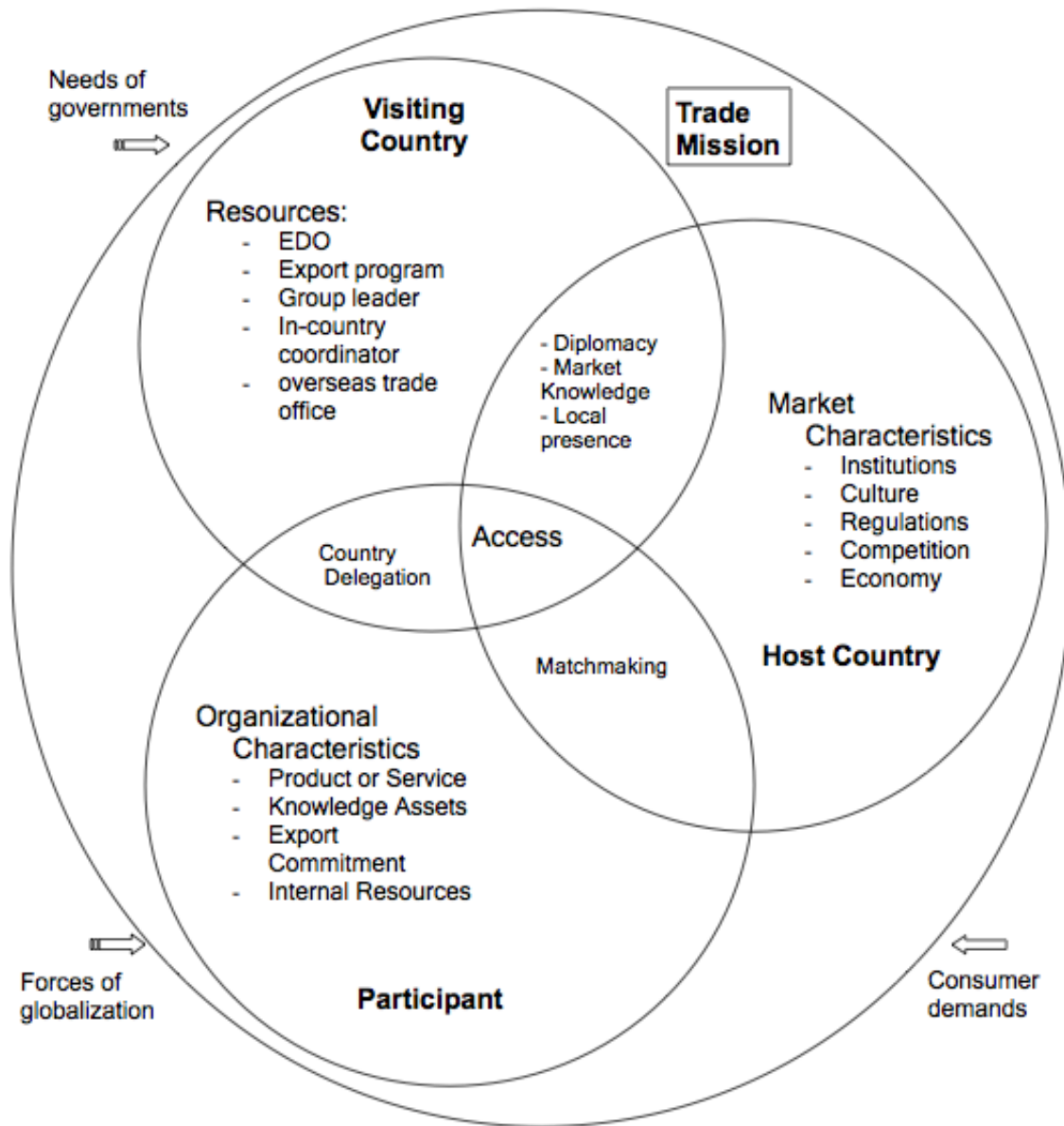
Additionally, Holtbrügge and Baron (2013) noted that alliance partners use one another's various resources for their competitive advantage. With U.S. firms benefiting from language and cultural similarities as South African firms (Egri et al., 2012), and more similar than the other BRICS countries, these U.S. firms' cultural resources might benefit their partnerships. Thus, the American and South African firms' alliance might provide a competitive advantage over their competitors from countries with greater cultural distance.

### **Findings Related to the Literature**

**Resources provided by the visiting country organizing team.** There are many trading partner options in today's globalized environment. Characteristically of globalization, the effect of distance diminishes with improvements in telecommunications, thus, creating a highly competitive trade environment. With globalization forcing businesses to expand into new markets, as consumer demand comes from far-flung places, EDOs assist SME managers in navigating around foreign institutions by providing export assistance. The study participants noted that the EDOs provided market knowledge and access to key government and industry players. The EDO can provide external resources such as market knowledge on: institutions,

transaction costs, regulations, and other industry idiosyncrasies. The participants identified the resourcefulness of the organizing team in themes 1, 2, 4, and 6. In addition, the services EDOs offer to supplement SMEs resources such as trade missions and other EPPs provide opportunities to build international experience.

As shown in Figure 2, a trade mission participant, being a member of the



*Figure 2.* A Venn diagram showing the dynamic relationships in a trade mission. This model depicts the resources and capabilities of the three actors, their relationship, and external influencers of consumer demand, government needs, and the impact of globalization on the process.

delegation has access to the EDO's network and other external resources. The presence of high-level leadership adds credibility to the delegation and ensures host country participation. The group leader's role is to provide access for the participants. Further, the visiting country's brand can provide a significant advantage if the country has effectively promoted the implicit benefits of the brand, such as the U.S. brand relating to quality products.

The purpose of economic development is to implement policy and strategic goals to provide an innovative economic environment for business growth. The needs of government were job creation and increasing the tax base (Griffith & Czinkota, 2012). The practices of economic development include initiatives, such as trade missions that address the needs of internationalizing businesses. The EDO proactively recruits to match firms to their programs, and conversely, firms seek the EDO for assistance based on their growth needs. P20 noted the EDO identified and recruited their firm as a good candidate for participating in the trade mission to South Africa based on previous discussions about their business goals. As evidenced by the success of this participant, the EDO's good selection occurs when the program presents benefits to the firm. Consequently, firms' leaders can exploit the trade missions for competitive advantage.

Several participants noted the EDO presented the trade mission program as a solution for their recruitment goals rather than for its benefit to their company. The study participants' frustration suggested that the EDO did not understand their perceptions and expectations of participating in a trade mission and other available services. Based on



P8's negative response, the EDO did not consider the effectiveness of the trade mission for this company's needs. Researchers found bundling resources was an effective approach for increasing exports. This approach worked for those who participated in a trade mission and trade show during the same visit.

**The organizational characteristics of the participants.** Figure 2 illustrates some areas of concerns where the EDO might focus to determine the export readiness of the SME. The SMEs internal resources include (a) export knowledge, (b) market knowledge, (c) organizational culture, (d) management characteristics, and (e) technological advantages. These characteristics identified strengths or weaknesses that the firm should acknowledge during the planning phase. Some of the participants were able to articulate their organizational strengths and weaknesses relevant to the competitive environment during the strategic planning process as identified in theme 1. Various participants identified their international experience as their strength, which combined with other overseas visits provided for their international intelligence. For some participants, their limited market knowledge affected their understanding of the competitive environment and their ability to plan. Only one participant indicated market knowledge was a strength for the company.

The relevance of EDOs in reducing informational and other barriers for the SME was prevalent throughout the literature (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2012; Leonidou et al., 2011; Shamsuddoha et al., 2009). The participants indicated the importance of information resources as found in themes 1, 2, and 6: *Strategic planning, Briefings manage*

*expectations*, and *Identification of barriers*. Participants acknowledged that organizers provided research in various forms; however, the general complaint was the information addressed higher-level macroeconomic issues on politics and the economy, rather than their specific requirements. Granted, Holtbrügge and Baron (2013) identified the institutional environment as disruptive for market entry; participants made assumptions about the environment based on the government research and news reports, and for some, these reports were their only sources of information before the trade mission. P14 stated, "You know you can probably have shown that to me in the classroom, and maybe it would've rung true, but it's nothing like being there." Although, P14's statement acknowledged an awareness of the personal responsibility for preparation, some of the participants waited to gain the experience.

SMEs using their internal resources and exhibiting a market-oriented culture employed learning strategies as a resource. Recognizing and using these capabilities might advantage firms that had the foresight to participate in a trade mission for exploratory purposes, such as P10 and P12. These firms had slack financial resources and organizational capabilities to exploit new market opportunities. In another use of market knowledge, P16 and P20 demonstrated their understanding of the competitive environment. Additionally, their strategic plans identified an export model choice before the trade mission. Their preparation led to successful outcomes. He et al. (2013) reported the firm's market orientation along with export model choice can create increased export performance.

In a similar manner to market orientation, innovation capabilities are important resources. Firms exploit these capabilities by creating competitive differences through price or product differentiation. For example, Love and Roper (2015) found technological capabilities provide a positive and significant effect on innovation and export performance. Thus, when faced with a limited domestic customer base, P5 looked to internationalization for growth. They had innovation and technological capabilities; however, lack of market knowledge hindered their market entry into South Africa. Although the company strength for some participants was innovative products, some weaknesses were limited market knowledge or a lack of innovative financial solutions.

The participant firms' structural weaknesses included: (a) size, (b) lack of technological resources, (c) lack of innovation, (d) lack of management commitment, and (e) information barriers. Generally lacking amongst the participants was their managerial export commitment. Whereas, findings in the literature were that: leadership skills (Love & Roper, 2015), management attitudes (Navarro-García et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2015), and managers' values (Arend, 2013) were critical factors in export success and competitive advantage. Managers such as P16, having a commitment to the organization's international goals, and a wealth of international experience provided the organization VRINness. P16 displayed characteristics that the EDO valued; consequently, they also sought, for the benefit of the other delegates, this participant's internationalization knowledge.

For most of the research participants, the use of knowledge resources was greatly lacking, which impeded the progress for many of the participants. For example, there were instances where limited market research preceding the trade mission presented an incomplete competitive picture. For example, P17 saw the market already saturated with competition from other countries and because of incomplete information, did not see the benefit of an alliance until well after the trade mission had concluded. Although experiential knowledge is an important factor, Kaleka (2012) concluded informational capabilities were of paramount importance for export performance.

In addition to providing information, participants indicated a few EDOs provided assistance in developing international business plans. This support reduced the weaknesses that P13 experienced as an entrepreneur. However, P8 did not receive support from the EDO before the trade mission and concluded feeling that the trade mission was a complete waste of time. In contrast, several participants were successful partly due to the partnership they formed with the EDO before the trade mission. Participants who had international experience, through either business or leisure travel, used the trade mission to establish partnerships with the EDO or for the specific benefit of the matchmaking program. The experienced international travelers appeared to understand their support needs better than those with no international experience. Fletcher and Harris (2012) found a problem for some small firms new to the international environment, was an inability to anticipate their needs.

**The market characteristics of the host country.** The participants discussed the effects of marketplace barriers in theme 6. An understanding of barriers to trade is necessary for an exporter or participant of a trade mission for making determinations of the markets that have the best opportunities with the least amount of resistance. As shown in Figure 2, the EDO provides services that reduce the informational barriers that can affect the internationalization of firms (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2012), as well as, trade mission outcomes. EDOs provide information on current market conditions and other market characteristics; essential information managers use to determine the market fit and reduce uncertainty (Hilmerston & Jansson, 2012). This knowledge gathering comes from familiarization and dialog with the visiting country team, and other network resources, such as the overseas officer and the in-country organizer. P3 stated market knowledge can be a key factor in successful outcomes if the country team has appropriate networks, “it depends on the relationship that the counterparts in South Africa have . . . [my] contact had access at high levels of government, which made it more successful.” One of the barriers to exporting was informational, and concomitant factors relating to networks including barriers related to identifying the first contact.

There are various strategies for understanding the external environment for market entry including environmental scanning: a process for gathering and evaluating pertinent market information that might influence business decisions in the new environment (Parnell et al., 2012). Further, He et al. (2013) suggested a marketing orientation for gathering and responding to market intelligence, about the external

environment. When applied to exporting a marketing orientation assists with strategy development for market entry including development of product requirements, and for managing the institutional environment (He et al., 2013). When the SME leader uses a marketing orientation approach, the information gathered minimizes mistakes in entering a new market.

Trade mission brochures and EDO websites were resources that participants identified in theme 4, *Identification of resources*. Organizers provided these materials including destination photos, in a similar manner to a travel brochure. However, there was limited industry information provided. Most of the participants conducted some research and a few relied only on the information presented in the brochure. Based on these findings, those participants having limited institutional market knowledge were in positions of competitive weakness. Noted by Johanson and Vahlne (2009), the liability of outsidership comes from a lack of market-specific business knowledge. Delegates can overcome outsidership by becoming an insider in a business network.

As supported by the literature, using social networks reduces participants' informational barriers. Therefore, establishing an alliance as an entry strategy was a means for reducing barriers. In that regard, using their personal and professional networks expanded the participants' exploratory activities. Accordingly, participants used the knowledge resources of the organizer to access key players. Further, some participants used the trade mission as an opportunity to network with other delegates. Lavie (2006) theorized for the RBT, that using external networks as resources can

provide competitive advantage. The external network implicitly informs social behaviors and institutional knowledge. P4 found the network provided introductions that only an insider could access:

This other fellow invited me to go to the Eastern Cape with him in his bakkie . . .so my first Braai was in the Free State, driving through with a group of other Afrikaners . . .this particular guy, was like, "Hey, I will introduce you to what I do."

External environmental barriers refer to the economic, political, legal, and sociocultural environment of the host country that can affect market entry. Other barriers included problems of regulations, taxes, logistics, and exchange rates. The participants identified these barriers including: (a) government penalties, (b) protecting intellectual property, and (c) crime or corruption. EDOs provide EPPs, such as trade missions and overseas offices to encourage exports to targeted countries and to provide a source of host-country knowledge. U.S. states select South Africa as a trade destination because of the U.S. AGOA legislation that verifies country beneficiaries have established market-based policies. Some participants chose the South African market because of the cultural image, history, and potential business opportunities.

The third group of barriers included culture and language (Karakaya & Yannopoulos, 2012). Participants mentioned cultural barriers most frequently, although they did not specifically indicate that language was a barrier. P21 noted some cultural mistakes were more than embarrassing as they could result in financial losses that the

company might not be able to overcome. For example, culturally dissimilar countries will have different values for ethical decisions and other perceptions (Albaum, 2012; Arend, 2013; Shenkar, 2012). Different ethical values and corrupt behavior can have a long lasting negative effect. There were representatives, such as P8, P10, P16, and P19, whose cultural intelligence (CQ) was a resource for their firms. Metacognitive CQ is the ability to acquire and understand cultural knowledge (Magnusson et al., 2013). The participants who researched the business culture of South Africa were prepared to manage the subtleties of social, language, and business behaviors, and thus poised for favorable outcomes.

Some participants would agree that having cultural knowledge before travelling reduces the psychic distance and foreignness when the participant arrives in the market to conduct business. Johanson and Vahlne (2009) stated the firm has a liability from not having institutional market knowledge and not demonstrating an understanding of the language, laws, and rules of the country. One participant described a trade mission as the government agency's attempt to remove the foreignness of the place and encourage trade with emerging markets. Based on the participants' responses in Table 5, the trade mission provided exposure to the culture of the place. Additionally, according to P18 and P20, the trade mission created a positive environment for the participants to build relationships.

For participants who were new to Africa, the trade mission provided a cultural education and exposure to international business in an emerging market. A trade mission



provides exposure to the culture of the place to ease the participants into a foreign environment and allow them to gain an understanding of the place. The South African trade mission experience, for many of the participants, brought to the fore questions of what it meant to be and to be in that place, South Africa, "the cradle of humankind" as stated by P14. Heidegger used phenomenology to address the ontological question of the human being and a sense of place whereas the body exists in space (Seamon, 2013). Heidegger's notion of the intertwinement of people and their worlds acknowledges the participants desire to reduce the feeling of separation and their need to feel a part of the environment. This reference to phenomenology is relevant to the trade mission participants' experience, particularly in South Africa where participants experienced a sense of connectedness.

In phenomenology, the concept of the *lifeworld* relates to how people go through everyday life without paying attention to the aspects of daily life. Life goes on with little notice (Seamon, 2013). The lifeworld moves forward without notice until something occurs that affects the thinking about the ordinary world and regular routines. For example, when a change of place occurs that stimulates new thinking, the lifeworld appears different afterwards (Seamon, 2013). When the participants experienced the event in South Africa, it stimulated a fresh examination of what it meant to be *home*; which explains the many unprompted references of *home*. For many of them, it was the familiarity of the infrastructure: roads, buildings, hotels, and so forth. For some of the

participants, the definition of home was more spiritual. Whether it was spiritual or physical, at some level, the sense of being home occurred to all of them.

The experience of participating in a trade mission is meaningful beyond being transactional. During their concluding statements, participants defined what the essence of a trade mission was for them. Most participants responded, “It was a learning experience.” The trade mission provided an education about the country, including a cultural experience that made the educational experience valuable for their business, similarly, for their personal lives. The statement from P23 summarized the trade mission experience for most of the participants:

There was a level of comfort in knowing that the [EDO] had the structure, they had the program, they had the agenda already lined up, so that allowed me, that freed me up to be able to take it in and experience it and feel safe and comfortable.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

With this study, I addressed the strategies trade mission participants identified as contributors to successful trade mission outcomes. The findings extend the literature on trade missions and export performance. I confirmed findings of the criticality of market research, language proficiency, and cultural understandings for the trade mission participant, and of the business network. The goal of this study was to provide actionable business practices for preparing exporters, executing trade missions, and developing trade mission follow-up to ensure successful outcomes. Based on these findings, EDOs might

gain the perspective of the SME participants and develop programs that address their needs for participating in a trade mission and as potential exporters.

The *Five Stages of the Trade Mission Participation Process* concept (Figure 1) provides a novel perspective on how the participant experiences the trade mission event. Implementation of the *Five Stages Process* would require segmenting the trade mission into a series of programs each one addressing the changing requirements of the internationalizing SME. Rather than a single service for a trade mission event, the EDO would apply multiple services and customize the trade mission based on the specific needs of the participants. For instance, the EDO might conduct mission assessments with SMEs first, followed by the infusion of support services throughout the trade mission process including support to ensure that follow-up occurs afterward. By strategically infusing several services, EDOs could benefit participants to export more rapidly, such as P16 and P19, who successfully exported products to South Africa.

Considering the significant costs and time commitments of assisting SMEs move towards internationalization, the five stages perspective might transform the trade mission process. As a result, the considerable investment of public funds becomes justifiable, particularly as more SMEs export successfully and continuously. These results are compared to the lost opportunity costs for both SMEs and EDOs when the SME lacks (a) preparation, (b) internationalization intent, (c) management commitment, or (d) makes an inappropriate market selection. Through the recommendations

introduced in this study, I define and advocate methods to assist SMEs to their ultimate export outcome.

Additionally, the *Dynamic Relationships in a Trade Mission* (Figure 2) presents a model of the relationships and influencers that affect the trade mission. The elements of this model identified through the literature illustrate (a) the resources, capabilities and characteristics of the three actors; (b) their relationships; and (c) external influencers of consumer demand, government needs, and the impact of globalization on the process. Using this model would allow an EDO to identify interventions that could effect change in the trade mission process. These interventions might benefit the EDO and the trade mission participant in managing a successful event. The EDO's judicious selection practices and readiness tests could benefit all concerned stakeholders: the policy maker in appropriating funds, the EDO in recruiting a delegation to meet the mission goals, and the SME in developing a strategic plan for export success.

A strategic approach to international market selection and trade mission participation might require supplemental external assistance. As limited resources are characteristically representative of SMEs, the selection of a new market is critical. A better option would be for the SME to receive guidance for identifying the best environmental fit based on their business and the host country characteristics. As Morgan et al. (2012) suggested that government programs offer different solutions, particularly in assisting firms in their export market strategies. These efforts to improve

SMEs resources and capabilities to increase internationalization might encourage more SMEs towards successful export performance when they do enter a new market.

Governments provide programs to assist SME development, as there is a common need for economic growth. To create a resource that provides VRIN/O for firms, the EDO should develop unique programs to address the needs of the local economy and provide programs focused on the markets where their product or services have the best fit. These findings show the RBT has application for government export programs such as trade missions, trade shows, and overseas offices, particularly where the *Made In* brand is a resource. In many studies, researchers used the RBT to address the internationalization of SMEs. In this study, I used the voice of the SME trade mission participant to discuss their ability to export to an emerging market, the resources they required, the barriers encountered, and their export outcomes.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Exporting goods and services has substantial benefits to the national economy. It leads to the expansion of business opportunities, the creation of new jobs, and the contribution of economic growth. For these reasons, U.S. government agencies and States initiate trade mission events. The federal government supports these initiatives through the State Trade and Export Promotion (STEP) program. This grant program has enabled states to expand their export services such as increasing the availability of trade missions. Accordingly, an increase in trade missions would be justification for a broader understanding of the needs of trade mission participants. This study resulted in

discovering common themes and strategies that SME leaders need for successful exporting after a trade mission.

### **Tangible Improvements**

The results of this study may influence business practices for preparing exporters, executing trade missions, and developing trade mission follow-up. This study might benefit the SME through the changed perception of trade mission organizers. By acknowledging the unique characteristics of the SME, organizers might understand the different needs of SME delegates, particularly the newly internationalizing businesses. SMEs require different levels of support beyond that of a large firm or an MNE. My suggestions echo Cumming et al. (2014) in their call for business support programs focused on the SME firm's readiness for international expansion. The organizers might see the commonality of the trade mission experience through the Five Stages Process, and, as a result, address the needs of the SME as they occur through each stage. These changes might lead to better-prepared trade mission participants who have the resources to meet their export performance goals.

Organizers might team-up with other business and community support services to provide a program of (a) an evaluation before the trade mission, (b) market knowledge development, (c) cultural enrichment, and (d) follow-up support, thereby addressing the stages preceding and following the trade mission. Using this team approach, the organizers can better identify that participants meet a readiness test for successful trade mission participation. Consequently, the participants' ability to export after a trade

mission to an emerging market would demonstrate substantial improvements. Hence, this study of U.S. trade missions may positively impact the development of SME's to export and become long-term exporters.

### **Recommendations for Action**

These recommendations are for (a) EDOs and managers who implement export promotion programs, (b) SME managers seeking to internationalize who desire government support, (c) policy makers who provide direction to economic development, (d) Chambers of Commerce and Industry Associations executives who conduct or promote trade missions, (e) and business support centers that provide assistance to SMEs. The five recommendations include: (a) requiring a test of readiness, (b) a rights and responsibilities agreement, (c) an acceptance program, (d) identification and support for the SME, and (e) EDOs coordinating support through partner organizations.

**A test of readiness.** For many of the interviewees who were first-time trade mission participants, the preparation for the trade mission was inadequate for successful performance. The lack of preparation suggests the selection process should include consideration of the internationalization level of the participants. Their strategic plan would provide evidence of their international intention, as presented in Theme 1. Trade mission organizers recruiting SMEs to their international program should require or provide a test of readiness before accepting newly internationalizing SMEs. Moreover, the organizers can better identify participants that meet the readiness test if they publish their readiness requirements. Ensuring the firm is market ready by identifying

appropriate export programs through which to provide assistance can lead to the participant's success. Having the SME profiled through a readiness test would benefit the firm to know where the EDO can assist with external resources.

**A rights and responsibilities agreement.** As with the ethical principles of informed consent, the trade mission participant should understand the risks and benefits of working with the EDO and participating in a trade mission. Providing a *Rights and Responsibilities Agreement* would reduce some of the confusion and manage expectations of the participants, and it can ensure the EDO attends to the *Five Stages of Trade Mission Participation Process*. Another contributor to successful outcomes besides presenting the services the organizer provides and having the profile of successful participants is the development of a trusting relationship between the organizer and the SME. First, the trade mission organizer should define the organization's role in the trade mission process to reduce unmet expectations through formal briefings as presented in Theme 2,. Secondly, the agreement might include the EDO's commitment to services, such as: (a) identifying and reporting the market characteristics, (b) identifying firms with products that suit the market, (c) making a selection of the participants based on their international intent, (d) preparing the firm for the trade mission by providing a macroeconomic briefing, (e) conducting business matchmaking, (f) managing the trade mission experience, (g) assisting with follow-up, and (h) providing an end-of-mission report.

**An acceptance program.** As the trade mission is a public investment, the public has the right to know the public benefits of trade missions. An acceptance program



would reduce criticism of the trade mission as being a junket as presented in various news clippings. The EDO needs to identify the needs of the newly internationalizing SME prior to the trade mission. In having a formal acceptance program the EDO would develop an understanding of the SME's business needs and their expectations. Having an extensive profile of the business would allow the EDO to bundle services to address the exporting needs of the SME. The participant should avoid joining the delegation without an export business plan. Unless their purpose in participating was as P22 stated to support the group leader and experience the country. Before entering market, the participant should address the question, *Why are you here?* as required from Theme 3. The trade mission provides an opportunity to conduct market research; however, EDOs expect sales results or mission effects (Head & Ries, 2010). A working partnership should ensure that the participant can answer the *Why* question and the EDO can answer the *How much* question.

**Identify the support needs of the participants.** The SME's knowledge resources are critical for eventual success. Therefore, preceding the trade mission, SMEs should identify their deficiencies and business support needs, noted in Themes 4 and 6, the identification of resources and barriers. The participants might determine their internal and external resource requirements through an international assessment, followed by the development of an international business plan and marketing strategy. These activities should motivate discussions with the organizers and further reflection for the SME to identify perceived barriers and the resources available to address them. Early in

the process, the EDO should focus on the SME's knowledge acquisition strategies for developing internationalization and market knowledge. Knowledge acquisition skills are critical when the SME is on the ground in a new market having a new experience such as in a trade mission. Therefore, participants should prepare for the trade mission and enhance their knowledge of the host environment prior to arrival. Delegates' mission preparation should ensure the results for Theme 5, the participants' positive perceptions leading to positive outcomes.

**Coordinate support through partners.** After the trade mission, a follow-up briefing, occurring shortly after the participant's return will identify the specific support needs of the participants. A mission debriefing might assist the SME in the development of an actionable follow-up plan as suggested in Theme 5. Further, EDOs should consider additional methods to disseminate their services and create greater access to other export-related services to SMEs in rural areas or those that have challenges due to their location. Providing support through business incubation centers, innovation, and technology parks, or other business support programs might address access constraints and expand the variety of programs (Cumming & Fischer, 2012). These programs can ensure that participants develop a comprehensive export program and with the ensuing commitment of resources. Theme 7 was *Export commitment*, which refers to the participant and the EDO. Findings from empirical studies showed that organizations and their participants demonstrating export commitment realized profitable outcomes.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

A follow-up study after the National Export Initiative program, at the end of 2015, would provide useful insights into the success or failure of the initiative. A study of these aspects could update the knowledge of U.S. export programs and provide insights for future interventions. Additionally, there were few studies on individual states' economic development efforts, or their challenges in encouraging SMEs to export. Findings from a future study could provide insight to export development on the state level. Furthermore, there were no recent studies, within the past 5 years that provided demographic characteristics of U.S.-based firms participating in trade missions. Conducting a follow-up study using a quantitative method could identify the stage of internationalization of trade mission participants and highlight the international new ventures, or the small firms that internationalize early.

### **Reflections**

In the business literature, most authors addressed only the quantitative aspects of trade missions and export performance, I found none reported the qualitative experience of the trade mission. In this study, my goal was to ensure the recognition of the participants' voices and have their truths acknowledged. I accomplished this through in-depth, conversational interviews. This approach was vital for putting the participant at ease to allow them the freedom to speak freely. Using verbatim transcription, I noted the long pauses, the raised voice, the audible breaths; and these natural elements added depth to the interpretive process. These elements signaled when the conversation was moving

towards authenticity. I sensed the participants' willingness to change through the process, and we moved together to a shared new understanding of the phenomenon of trade mission participation.

During the country visit, the participants' focus on being in the place created a sense of personal involvement with South Africa. The country had a special vibrancy coming from the infrastructure, the people's history, and the participants' interaction within the space. As a result, interviewees shared a compassionate openness to developing business alliances. I understood this experience because of my history with South Africa. My international business background and the experience of managing, and participating in trade missions reawakened my empathy to the problem of SMEs not making sales after their trade mission events. Hence, by interpreting their experience in South Africa as trade mission participants, findings from this study reflect their ideas to make the trade mission experience better and more profitable.

### **Summary and Study Conclusions**

The primary focus of this research was to explore the strategies of SME leaders that participated in trade missions to South Africa. I used a qualitative descriptive approach in describing the event, and the meanings participants ascribed to their trade mission visit to South Africa. Through thematic analysis, I developed a description of the trade mission process. The results are the seven strategies identified through the themes: (a) strategic planning, (b) briefings manage expectations, (c) they want to know why you are here, (d) identification of resources, (e) positive perceptions lead to positive

outcomes, (f) identification of barriers, and (g) export commitment. Each participant experienced the trade mission within five stages that reflect these themes.

The trade mission was a publicly or corporate sponsored export tool that was a resource for creating a competitive advantage for some of the U.S. firms in the South African market. Having a limited perspective on the market, which affected their planning, some incurred opportunity costs of time and money. Hence, from this study emerged five recommended actions that organizations' leaders can employ to strengthen their businesses trade mission outcomes. These were: (a) requiring a test of readiness, (b) a rights and responsibilities agreement, (c) an acceptance program, (d) identification and support for the SME, and (e) EDOs coordinating support through partner organizations.

Finally, these five recommendations addressed the research question of identifying strategies SME leaders require for successfully exporting their products and services after a trade mission. The recommendations are for EDOs and participants because as a country team, they benefit one another, and in the host country, they work to build each team members' success. Therefore, by sharing resources and building the SME's capabilities before the market visit, the SME participant will return having experienced a successful trade mission. Accordingly, SME leaders' will benefit by developing internationalization knowledge: how to access relevant information, have the ability to absorb and assimilate the appropriate knowledge, understand how to access a foreign market, and have enhanced strategies to function competitively in a foreign

market. These recommendations will increase the number of SMEs that seek to export and increase their opportunities to export after a trade mission.

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## Appendix A: Consent and Confidentiality Form

You are invited to take part in a research study that investigates, through a qualitative phenomenological method approach, factors of SMEs performance from a trade mission. The findings could offer solutions for economic development organizations in developing export promotion programs to assist their firms in participating in trade missions to emerging markets. The researcher is inviting company representatives who participated in a trade mission(s) to South Africa to be in the study. This form is part of a process called informed consent to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is conducted by a researcher named Tongila Manly, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You may already know the researcher as the former Managing Director of Enterprise Florida Southern Africa Office or as Chief Executive Officer of TMG Solutions PTY Ltd but this study is separate from these roles.

### **Background Information:**

This study will describe SMEs that attended trade missions to an emerging market to understand their perspective of the trade mission experience and to explore the factors that contribute to successful export performance after a trade mission.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a 30- to 60-minute interview
- Choose the method of the interview by telephone, in person, or via SKYPE
- Allow for an audio recording of the interview. A summary of the transcribed interview will be provided to you to review for accuracy.
- Provide any documents that provide a better description of your answers

Here are some sample interview questions:

Q1. Describe your planning process when you prepared for your trade mission to South Africa.

Q3. Explain your thoughts about the South African business culture prior to the trade mission.

Q7. What company strengths impacted your performance during and after the trade mission to South Africa?

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as the fatigue of sitting for a 60 minute interview, stress or becoming upset. Being in this study would not pose risks to your safety or wellbeing.

The potential benefit of this study will provide a better understanding of characteristics of businesses that perform successfully during and after trade missions to South Africa.

**Payment:**

There will be no payment or other compensation for participating in this study. Additionally, the researcher will not be paid for conducting the study.

**Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information or company information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by the researcher and the transcript and tape will be removed from the computer and kept in a locked file. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university. You may keep a copy of the informed consent form. As a participant in the study, you will receive a copy of the research, when completed.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email: [tongila.manly@waldenu.edu](mailto:tongila.manly@waldenu.edu) or telephone 001-904-228-4679. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call \_\_\_\_\_. . . . the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. The phone number is \_\_\_\_\_, extension \_\_\_\_ or for international calls, \_\_\_\_\_. Walden University's approval number for this study is \_\_\_\_\_ and it expires on \_\_\_\_\_.

Please print or save this consent form for your records. This consent form will be discussed again at the time of the interview.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By replying to this email with the words, I consent, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above. The consent will begin from the point of the introductory emails.

Only include the signature section below if using paper consent forms.



## Appendix B: Script for Introducing the Research

### *1. Introduction*

Hello, my name is Tongila Manly. Earlier this week I sent an email providing an introduction and the reason for this call. I am a student at Walden University conducting research for a doctoral study. This research concerns participants that represented a company attending a trade mission. Through public records, I have identified that your company (Company Name) participated in a trade mission to South Africa between 1993 to 2013.

*Allow time for a response*

The purpose of my contact is to explain my research study and to ascertain your interest in participating in an interview that could take between 30 to 60 minutes of your time?

This study is to understand the characteristics of companies that participate in trade missions. I am interested in understanding your personal experience. Your personal experience will provide information that might lead to better programs to assist small and medium enterprises in exporting. If it is true that you participated in a trade mission to South Africa, would you be interested in participating in this study?

*If yes, proceed to 2. Informed Consent*

*If no, proceed to 5. Referral*

### *2. Informed Consent*

Your participation in this study requires that I inform you of the benefits and risks of participation. I would like to take the time to review with you a document that explains the study, the method of collecting the information, the voluntary nature of your participation, and your rights as a participant. I will take a few minutes to summarize this document, however, I will send it to you for review.

*Review the headings of the Consent and Confidentiality Form. Allow time for a response.*

If you agree to participate, your returned email with your consent will allow us to proceed.

Are you available for an interview within the next 3 weeks?

*If yes, proceed to 3. Schedule the Interview*

*If no, proceed to 5. Referral*

### *3. Schedule the Interview*

I am available to conduct the interview between (Month and Date) and (Month and Date). Generally, I will conduct the interview between 9am to 1pm, however, if these times are not suitable, we can make arrangements during times that are more suitable to your schedule.

*Allow time for a response*

### *4. Confirm the Meeting and the Location*

*If the participant is within 2 hours driving distance:* I would like to offer you the option of meeting in person, a telephone interview, or we can conduct the interview over SKYPE, if you use that technology.

*If the participant is more distant:* I would like to offer you the option of conducting a telephone interview, or we can conduct the interview over SKYPE, if you use that technology.

I will send you an email confirming the details of the interview.

### *5. Referral*

Is there someone else that you might refer that might be appropriate for this study? I will not disclose your name when I contact this person.

*If no:* Thank you for your time.

*If yes, then ask:* Would you provide the name and contact details of the person that you recommend. Please understand that your name and your company name will remain confidential.

*After receiving the information:* Thank you for your time.

## Appendix C: Sample Invitation to Participate in Research

Dear NAME,

I am looking to identify people known to have participated in a trade mission to South Africa between 1993 and 2013 for the purposes of conducting doctoral research. I am looking to conduct an interview for a doctoral study relating to trade missions where the participant's input would provide insight to the process. Various public records of trade missions identify the participating companies of which your company was listed. Your participation in this study is voluntary.

If possible, I would like to speak with you within the next few days, at your convenience, for 5 minutes to discuss the research that I am conducting on trade missions to South Africa. I am flexible and can speak with you at any time that is convenient to you.

If you feel that you are not the most appropriate person to participate, would you kindly provide another person that you know that participated in a trade mission to South Africa? Your referral will be kept confidential.

Thanks for your consideration. I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Regards,

Tongila Manly  
Doctoral Candidate  
Walden University

## Appendix D: Interview Guide

The research question that will guide this study is: What strategies do SME leaders require for successful exportation of their goods and services after a trade mission experience?

### **Introduction**

Note the time (Beginning and end)

Confirm informed consent

Confirm confidentiality

Explain the objective and relevance of the research

### **Interview Prompts**

1. Describe your planning process when you prepared for your trade mission to South Africa.
2. What prior knowledge did you have about trade missions before planning your visit to South Africa?
3. Explain your thoughts about South African business culture prior to the trade mission.
4. Describe the type of reception you received when your delegation visited South Africa?
5. What role did the trade mission leader play in your firm's performance during and after the trade mission?
6. What barriers did you experience when you attempted to engage with South African companies?

7. What company strengths impacted your performance during and after the trade mission to South Africa?
8. What company weaknesses impacted your performance during and after the trade mission to South Africa?
9. Describe your perceptions of South Africa, which might have changed after participating in the trade mission?
10. Based on your perspective after the trade mission, how did this impact your follow-up activities?
11. What would it mean to your company to have an alliance with a South African company?

Conclusion and explanation of the verbatim transcript that they will have the opportunity to review.

## Appendix E: Participant Demographics for Trade Missions to South Africa

*Participant Demographics for Trade Missions to South Africa*


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No.	Interview method	Type of trade mission event
<hr/>		
1	Telephone	Governor / Lt. Governor
2	Skype	Governor / Lt. Governor
3	Telephone	State: EDO or other elected official
4	Skype	USDA Trade Mission
5	Telephone	State: EDO or other elected official
6	Telephone	Regional: City or County
7	Skype	Regional: City or County
8	Skype	State: EDO or other elected official
9	Telephone	State: EDO or other elected official
10	Telephone	Governor / Lt. Governor
11	Telephone	Governor / Lt. Governor
12	Skype & Telephone	State: EDO or other elected official
13	Telephone	Industry Association, Chamber of Commerce or other
14	Telephone	State: EDO or other elected official
15	Telephone	Discontinued
16	Telephone	US Commerce Mission
17	Telephone	Regional: City or County
18	Telephone	Governor / Lt. Governor
19	Telephone	USDA Trade Mission
20	Telephone	US Commerce Mission
21	Telephone	Industry Association, Chamber of Commerce or other
22	Telephone	Regional: City or County
23	Telephone	Industry Association, Chamber of Commerce or other

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